MOST COMPETITIVE MEN'S SIX NATIONS EVER REACHES ITS CLIMAX

RUGBY WORLD®

EXCLUSIVES

SIONE TUIPULOTU
CAELAN DORIS
TOMMY ALLAN
JAC MORGAN
KEN OWENS
MARO ITOJE

SIX NATIONS SPECTACULAR!

WOMEN'S 6N TEAM GUIDES

~

TACKLE HEIGHT CONTROVERSY

~

RED ROSES REBUILD

FUTURE

ISSUE APRIL 2023

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
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1884
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GUINNESS
SIX NATIONS
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Heel turn

The ball goes loose as Hugo Keenan competes in the air with Damian Penaud. Ireland won 32-19 to end France's 14-match winning run

Picture **Billy Stickland/Inpho**

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE TALKING ABOUT THIS MONTH...

"Welsh rugby must rise from the ashes – again"

TRYING TO get a handle on elite Welsh rugby today is akin to nailing jelly to the wall. Even in summing up recent crises, you end up stacking lines on top of each other.

We were already dealing with the accusations of misogyny and horrific language towards female colleagues, and then watching the CEO step down as the head of such a troubled organisation. But falling in to offer us up more shock is the state of the men's pro game, where a potential strike was only just averted.

Pulling together
The Wales team

PICS Getty Images

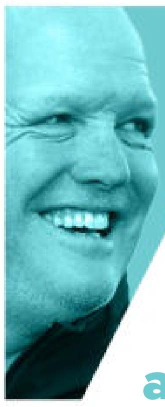
The bold action was mooted in protest at contract issues and financial uncertainty – it has been estimated that around 90 regional players would be off contract at the end of the season.

There are other issues players fought for: they want Wales Rugby Players' Association representation at meetings of the Professional Rugby Board. They want the 60-cap rule scrapped, so that players with fewer than 60 caps can still represent their country if they play abroad. And significantly, they want to axe the move towards contracts with fixed and variable elements – namely having 80% in set wages and the other 20% possible in bonuses.

A compromise on contracts was reached between players and the union, while the 60-cap rule will be knocked down to 25. However, the funding model for the four regions is still as clear as a Hartley's raspberry wobbler. As our excellent new columnist Ken Owens said after negotiations: "We need to put Welsh rugby back at the top of world rugby and not be the laughing stock which I think we are at the moment."

Many expect things to get worse before they get better. Either way, it's certainly theatrical. We just hope that the athletes in Wales are now getting the security and support their physical efforts and dedication deserve. RW

JOHN DOBSON THIS MONTH



"We won't win awards for tries from the end of the earth but we are improving. South Africans will make it a tougher competition" **P29**

HAVE YOUR SAY

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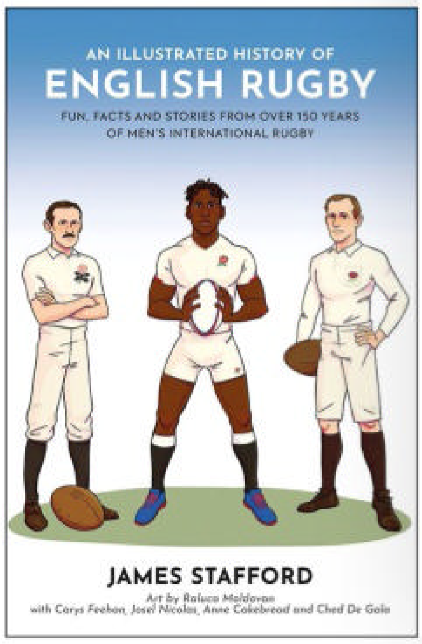
YOUR RUGBY CALENDAR

A look at the oval-ball events taking place across March

2nd

James Stafford's *An Illustrated History of English Rugby*, offering facts and stories from more than 150 years of the men's international game, hits the shelves. The paperback has illustrations from Raluca Moldovan and is available at all good bookstores.



AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF

ENGLISH RUGBY

FUN, FACTS AND STORIES FROM OVER 150 YEARS OF MEN'S INTERNATIONAL RUGBY

JAMES STAFFORD

Art by Raluca Moldovan

17th

World Cup-winning prop Phil Vickery (left) welcomes horse racing fans to his newly expanded No 3 restaurant in Cheltenham for Festival week. The 73-cap England icon won Celebrity Masterchef in 2011 and will also be a special guest at the London Gold Cup Lunch with Liverpool legend Robbie Fowler at the Kia Oval.

12th

Gloucester will wear a special-edition match shirt designed by Ed Slater's three children, Edie (8), Flo (7) and Frank (4) against Leicester Tigers in the second Slater Cup match. The second-row was diagnosed with MND last July. £10 from each shirt sale will go to help the family – buy the shirts at eliteprosports.co.uk

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
27	28	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4 4th NEW ISSUE OUT	5	6	7	18	9

31st

The HSBC Sevens World Series circuit touches down in Hong Kong, with both the men's and women's tournaments taking place. The men were last in town in November when Australia (right) won the title. You can stream the games from the official website's Match Centre.

25th

The 2023 TikTok Women's Six Nations gets underway with the Red Roses taking on Scotland at Kingston Park and Wales hosting Ireland at Cardiff Arms Park. England will have to reset after seeing their record-breaking 30-game unbeaten run end in the World Cup final last November. Catch all the Six Nations action on the BBC.

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Subscribe to *Rugby World* this month and as well as enjoying super savings, you will receive some free boompods earbuds. For details see P30-31 or call 0330 333 1113.

RUGBY WORLD
SIX NATIONS SPECTACULAR!

DON'T MISS THIS MONTH

Our complete guide to all the women's Six Nations sides in what promises to be an enthralling competition

COVER PICS Getty Images & Inpho. **PIC** Getty Images

EDITOR'S LETTER

Skills to celebrate
Finn Russell entertains

The familiar magic is still there for all to see

YOU DON'T have to hunt for long if you're looking for stories to hammer rugby with right now. So as a bit of a palate cleanser, I asked my cousin's son, Murray, eight, what he'd made of the Six Nations.

At me came a charming stream of how he and his dad had spent match days at Murrayfield lately. Pizzas, churros, cheering the team bus… And that's not to mention him being around at a great time for young Scottish fans (I wouldn't dare bring him down with tales of the wilderness years). But what stood out was his enjoyment of interacting with those around him, equally buzzing.

We've seen some exceptional stuff so far this tournament, and not just in Edinburgh. The conclusion will be dramatic and arresting. And then we have the women's championship. We hope you all get swept up in it too.

Alan Dymock, Editor
Email: alan.dymock@futurenet.com
Twitter: @AlanDymock

SCAN TO GET RUGBY WORLD'S NEWSLETTER

THE DIRECTORY

All the big fixtures as the men give way to the women in the Six Nations

SUNDAY 5 MARCH

Gallagher Premiership
Newcastle v London Irish (3pm)
Sale v Saracens (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport

Allianz Premier 15s
Worcester v Wasps (1pm)

U18 women's International
England v Wales (1, Rugby School)

Super Rugby Pacific
Blues v Brumbies (3am)
Force v Reds (5.30am)

Top 14
Racing 92 v Toulouse

Men's Sevens World Series
Women's Sevens World Series
Both Vancouver, final day

WEDNESDAY 8 MARCH

Indigo Group Premiership
Newport v Carmarthen (7.30pm)

THURSDAY 9 MARCH

Indigo Group Premiership
Cardiff v Bridgend (7.30pm)

FRIDAY 10 MARCH

U20 Six Nations
Italy v Wales (7.15pm)
TV Live on BBCW, S4C & iPlayer
Scotland v Ireland (7.15pm)
England v France (8pm)
TV Both live on BBC iPlayer

Gallagher Premiership
Northampton v Bath (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby Pacific
Chiefs v Highlanders (6.05am)
Rebels v Waratahs (8.35am)

Indigo Group Premiership
Ebbw Vale v Merthyr (7.30pm)
Llandovery v Aberavon (7.30pm)

RFU Championship
Hartpury Uni v Bedford (7.45pm)

SATURDAY 11 MARCH

Six Nations
Italy v Wales (2.15pm)
TV Live on ITV & S4C
England v France (4.45pm)
TV Live on ITV

Gallagher Premiership
Exeter v Newcastle (2.30pm)

Allianz Premier 15s
Bristol v Harlequins (12.30pm)
Wasps v Loughborough (1.30pm)
DMP Sharks v Saracens (2pm)
Glos-Hartpury v Worcester (5pm)

Super Rugby Pacific
Drua v Crusaders (3.35am)
Hurricanes v Blues (6.05am)
Brumbies v Reds (8.35am)
Force v Moana (11am)

Indigo Group Premiership
RGC v Pontypridd (12.30pm)

RFU Championship
Cornish Pirates v Coventry (1.30)
Richmond v Nottingham (2pm)
Doncaster v Jersey (2.30pm)
Caldy v Ampthill (3pm)
Ealing v London Scottish (3pm)

SUNDAY 12 MARCH

Six Nations
Scotland v Ireland (3pm)
TV Live on BBC & RTÉ

Gallagher Premiership
Gloucester v Leicester (1pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
London Irish v Sale (1pm)
Bristol v Harlequins (3pm)

Allianz Premier 15s
Exeter v Sale (noon)

FRIDAY 17 MARCH

Super Rugby Pacific
Hurricanes v Waratahs (6.05am)

Indigo Group Premiership
Swansea v Llandovery (7.15pm)
Bridgend v Carmarthen (7.30pm)

RFU Championship
Bedford v Richmond (7.45pm)

SATURDAY 18 MARCH

Six Nations
Scotland v Italy (12.30pm)
TV Live on BBC & RTÉ
France v Wales (2.45pm)
TV Live on BBC & S4C
Ireland v England (5pm)
TV Live on ITV

Super Rugby Pacific
Chiefs v Rebels (3.35am)
Blues v Crusaders (6.05am)
Brumbies v Moana (8.35am)

RFU Championship
Coventry v Caldy
Jersey v Hartpury Uni (2pm)
Nottingham v Ealing (2pm)
Ampthill v Doncaster (3pm)
L Scottish v Cornish Pirates (3pm)

SUNDAY 19 MARCH

U20 Six Nations
Scotland v Italy (2pm)
Ireland v England (5pm)
TV Both live on BBC iPlayer
France v Wales (8pm)
TV Live on BBCW, S4C & iPlayer

Premiership Rugby Cup Final
London Irish v Exeter (2pm)

Super Rugby Pacific
Highlanders v Force (2.35am)
Reds v Drua (6am)

THURSDAY 23 MARCH

Indigo Group Premiership
Ebbw Vale v Aberavon (7.30pm)

FRIDAY 24 MARCH

Gallagher Premiership
Newcastle v Gloucester (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport

United Rugby Championship
Zebre Parma v Cardiff (7.10pm)
TV Live on BBC Wales & Viaplay
Leinster v Stormers (7.35pm)
TV Live on Viaplay

Super Rugby Pacific
Crusaders v Brumbies (6.05am)
Waratahs v Chiefs (8.35am)

Indigo Group Premiership
Merthyr v Bridgend (7.30pm)

RFU Championship
Hartpury Uni v Ampthill (7.45pm)

SATURDAY 25 MARCH

Women's Six Nations
Wales v Ireland
(2.15pm, Cardiff Arms Park)
TV Live on BBC & RTÉ
England v Scotland
(4.45pm, Kingston Park)
TV Live on BBC

Gallagher Premiership
Leicester v Bristol (12.30pm)
Saracens v Harlequins (3pm,
Tottenham Hotspur Stadium)
L Irish v Northampton (5.30pm)
TV Both live on BT Sport

United Rugby Championship
Benetton v Lions (1pm)
Ospreys v Dragons (3pm)
Connacht v Edinburgh (3.05pm)
TV All live on Viaplay
Scarlets v Sharks (5pm)
TV Live on S4C & Viaplay
Munster v Glasgow (5.15pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Ulster v Bulls (7.35pm)
TV Live on BBC NI & Viaplay

Super Rugby Pacific
Highlanders v Drua (3.35am)
Moana v Hurricanes (6.05am)
Rebels v Reds (8.35am)

Top 14
Bayonne v Pau
Bordeaux-Bègles v La Rochelle
Castres v Toulouse
Clermont v Brive
Lyon v Toulon
Perpignan v Montpellier
Stade Français v Racing 92

Indigo Group Premiership
Llandovery v Llanelli (2.30pm)

Energia AIL Men's Division 1A
Clontarf v Ballynahinch
Cork Con v Shannon
Dublin University v Lansdowne
Terence Coll v Garryowen
Young Munster v UCD

RFU Championship
Richmond v Jersey (2pm)
Doncaster v Coventry (2.30pm)
Caldy v London Scottish (3pm)
Ealing v Cornish Pirates (3pm)

SUNDAY 26 MARCH

Women's Six Nations
Italy v France
(3pm, Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi)
TV Live on BBC iPlayer & RTÉ

Gallagher Premiership
Bath v Exeter (2pm)
TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby Pacific
Blues v Force (3.35am)

RFU Championship
Nottingham v Bedford (3pm)

THURSDAY 30 MARCH

Indigo Group Premiership
Pontypridd v Newport (7.30pm)

31 MARCH-2 APRIL

Men's Sevens World Series
Women's Sevens World Series
Both in Hong Kong

FRIDAY 31 MARCH

Champions Cup Round of 16
Leicester v Edinburgh (8pm)
TV Live on BT Sport

Challenge Cup Round of 16
Bristol Bears v Clermont (8pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Scarlets v Brive (8pm)
TV Live on S4C

Super Rugby Pacific
Moana v Highlanders (7.05am)
Reds v Crusaders (9.35am)

Energia AIL Men's Division 1A
Lansdowne v Clontarf (8pm)
UCD v Dublin University (8pm)

RFU Championship
Coventry v Hartpury Uni (7.45pm)

SATURDAY 1 APRIL

Women's Six Nations
Ireland v France
(3.15pm, Musgrave Park)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media
Scotland v Wales
(5.30pm, DAM Health Stadium)
TV Live on BBC & RTÈ

Champions Cup Round of 16
Sharks v Munster (8pm)
Stormers v Harlequins (2pm)
TV Both live on BT Sport
Leinster v Ulster (5.30pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & RTÉ
La Rochelle v Gloucester (5.30)
TV Live on BT Sport

Challenge Cup Round of 16
Toulon v Cheetahs (12.30pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Benetton v Connacht (3pm)
Stade Français v Lyon (3pm)
Lions v Racing (4.30pm)
Glasgow v Dragons (5.30pm)
TV Both live on Viaplay
Cardiff v Sale (8pm)
TV Live on S4C & BT Sport

Super Rugby Pacific
Drua v Rebels (4.35am)
Chiefs v Blues (7.05am)
Brumbies v Waratahs (9.35am)

Indigo Group Premiership
Aberavon v RGC
Bridgend v Llandovery
Carmarthen v Ebbw Vale
Llanelli v Merthyr
Swansea v Cardiff

Energia AIL Men's Division 1A
Cork Con v Terenure College
Garryowen v Young Munster
Shannon v Ballynahinch

RFU Championship
Cornish Pirates v Caldy (2.30pm)
Ampthill v Richmond (3pm)
Bedford v Ealing (3pm)
Jersey v Nottingham (3pm)
London Scottish v Doncaster (3)

SUNDAY 2 APRIL

Women's Six Nations
England v Italy
(3pm, Franklin's Gardens)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media

Champions Cup Round of 16
Exeter v Montpellier (12.30pm)
TV Live on ITV & BT Sport
Saracens v Ospreys (3pm)
TV Live on S4C & BT Sport

19th
SUPER SUNDAY
Ireland and France do battle in the U20 Six Nations. See how the tournament unfolds when all six teams play on the final day

PICS AFP & Getty Images

1st

FOOLS ERRAND

Jonny May is tackled during Gloucester's Champions Cup defeat to La Rochelle in 2021. They meet again at the same stage on April Fools' Day – watch it on BT Sport

Toulouse v Bulls (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
Super Rugby Pacific
Hurricanes v Force (4.35am)

WEEKEND 7-9 APRIL
Champions Cup Quarter-finals
Challenge Cup Quarter-finals

FRIDAY 7 APRIL
Super Rugby Pacific
Crusaders v Moana (8.05am)
Reds v Brumbies (10.35am)
SAT 8-SUN 9 APRIL
Men's Sevens World Series
Singapore

SATURDAY 8 APRIL
Super Rugby Pacific
Highlanders v Hurricanes (8.05)
Rebels v Blues (10.35am)
Indigo Group Premiership
Cardiff v Aberavon
Carmarthen v RGC
Ebbw Vale v Pontypridd
Llandovery v Swansea
Llanelli v Bridgend
Newport v Merthyr

THURSDAY 12 APRIL
Indigo Group Premiership
Newport v Bridgend (7.30pm)

FRIDAY 14 APRIL
Gallagher Premiership
Bristol v Sale (7.45pm)
Gloucester v Bath (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Sharks v Benetton (5.30pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Glasgow v Scarlets (7.35pm)
TV Live on BBC Wales & Viaplay
Ulster v Dragons (7.35pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Super Rugby Pacific
Moana v Reds (8.05am)
Brumbies v Drua (10.35am)
RFU Championship
Hartpury Uni v L Scottish (7.45pm)
Nottingham v Ampthill (7.45pm)

SATURDAY 15 APRIL
Women's Six Nations
Wales v England
(2.15pm, Cardiff Arms Park)
TV Live on BBC & RTÉ
Italy v Ireland (4.45pm,
Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media
Gallagher Premiership
Harlequins v Newcastle (2pm)
Northampton v Saracens (2pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Lions v Leinster (1pm)
Bulls v Parma (3.05pm)
Stormers v Munster (5.15pm)
TV All live on Viaplay
Connacht v Cardiff (7.35pm)
TV Live on S4C & Viaplay
Edinburgh v Ospreys (7.35pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Super Rugby Pacific
Hurricanes v Chiefs (8.05am)
Waratahs v Force (10.35am)
Top 14
Brive v Stade Français
La Rochelle v Bayonne
Montpellier v Castres
Pau v Clermont
Racing 92 v Bordeaux-Bègles
Toulon v Perpignan
Toulouse v Lyon
Indigo Group Premiership
Aberavon v Llandovery
Carmarthen v Cardiff
Llanelli v Newport
Merthyr v Ebbw Vale
Pontypridd v RGC
Swansea v Bridgend
Energia AIL Men's Division 1A
Ballynahinch v Lansdowne
Clontarf v UCD
Dublin University v Garryowen
Terenure College v Shannon
Young Munster v Cork Con
RFU Championship
Doncaster v Cornish Pirates (2.30)
Bedford v Jersey (3pm)
Ealing v Caldy (3pm)
Richmond v Coventry (3pm)

SUNDAY 16 APRIL
Women's Six Nations
France v Scotland
(3.15pm, Stade de la Rabine)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media
Gallagher Premiership
Leicester v Exeter (2pm)
TV Live on BT Sport

WEEKEND 21-23 APRIL
Gallagher Premiership
Exeter v Bristol
Gloucester v Sale
Newcastle v Northampton
Saracens v London Irish
Harlequins v Bath

FRIDAY 21 APRIL
United Rugby Championship
Stormers v Benetton (5.30pm)
Ulster v Edinburgh (7.35pm)
TV Both live on Viaplay
Super Rugby Pacific
Chiefs v Drua (8.05am)
Rebels v Crusaders (10.35am)

SATURDAY 22 APRIL
Women's Six Nations
Ireland v England
(2.15pm, Musgrave Park)
TV Live on BBC & RTÉ
Scotland v Italy
(4.45pm, DAM Health Stadium)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media
United Rugby Championship
Lions v Zebre Parma (1pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Dragons v Scarlets (3pm)
TV Live on BBC Wales & Viaplay
Bulls v Leinster (3.05pm)
TV Live on Viaplay
Ospreys v Cardiff (5.15pm)
TV Live on S4C & Viaplay
Sharks v Munster (5.15pm)
Glasgow v Connacht (7.35pm)
TV Both live on Viaplay
Super Rugby Pacific
Blues v Waratahs (8.05am)
Force v Highlanders (10.35am)
Top 14
Bayonne v Montpellier
Bordeaux-Bègles v Lyon
Brive v Pau
Castres v Toulon
La Rochelle v Clermont
Perpignan v Racing 92
Stade Français v Lyon
Indigo Group Premiership
Bridgend v Swansea
Merthyr v Llanelli
RFU Championship
Jersey v Ealing (2pm)
Cornish Pirates v Hartpury (2.30)
Ampthill v Bedford (3pm)
Caldy v Doncaster (3pm)
Coventry v Nottingham (3pm)
London Scottish v Richmond (3)

SUNDAY 23 APRIL
Women's Six Nations
France v Wales
(3.15pm, Stade des Alpes)
TV Live on BBC & RTÉ

WEEKEND 28-30 APRIL
Champions Cup Semi-finals
Challenge Cup Quarter-finals

FRIDAY 28 APRIL
Super Rugby Pacific
Hurricanes v Brumbies (8.05am)
Waratahs v Highlanders (10.35)
RFU Championship
Nottingham v L Scottish (7.45pm)

SATURDAY 29 APRIL
Women's Six Nations
England v France
(1pm, Twickenham)
Italy v Wales (3.30pm,
Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi)
TV Both live on BBC & RTÉ
Scotland v Ireland
(7.30pm, DAM Health Stadium)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media
Super Rugby Pacific
Drua v Blues (3.05am)
Moana v Rebels (5.35am)
Chiefs v Crusaders (8.05am)
Reds v Force (10.35am)
Indigo Group Premiership
Newport v Llanelli
RGC v Swansea
RFU Championship
Doncaster v Ealing (2.30pm)
Bedford v Coventry (3pm)
Hartpury Uni v Caldy (3pm)
Jersey v Ampthill (3pm)
Richmond v Cornish Pirates (3pm)

WEEKEND 5-7 MAY
Gallagher Premiership
Bath v Saracens
Bristol v Gloucester
Leicester v Harlequins
London Irish v Exeter
Sale v Newcastle

FRIDAY 5 MAY
Super Rugby Pacific
Highlanders v Chiefs (8.05am)

● *All kick-offs UK & Ireland. Fixtures subject to change.*

DOWNTIME WITH... CHLOE ROLLIE

"I'd like to become a referee after I finish playing"

The Scotland full-back talks dogs, dinner parties and driving dump trucks

Interview **Elise Hamersley** // Pictures **Getty Images**

WHO GIVES the most backchat on the pitch? I don't want to admit it but it would have to be me. I'm very passionate and if I don't agree with a decision, I'll question it in the heat of the moment.

Do you have any phobias? I've got a really strange phobia of electric shocks. In shopping centres, you can catch an escalator or metal handle and get an electric shock – that's a big fear of mine. Sometimes I can't touch a door and have to get someone else to open it.

What really annoys you? It annoys me when people are messy in everyday situations. I hate it if they don't tidy up after themselves in the club room after having a sandwich or drink.

If your house was on fire, what one item would you save? It's not one item but I've got three dogs – two West Highland Terriers and a Bearded Collie – so I would say them. I would definitely put them in a bag and take them out!

What's the best present you've ever received? A few years ago my mum got a very wholesome picture of me and my dogs printed on a canvas which I would have never expected.

Who would be your three dream dinner party guests? My first one would be Calvin Harris because he would put on a good show with a bit of music at the end and he seems like a cool guy to have a chat with.

Then Adele because she's so funny in the media and would be a good laugh. I would go for Finn Russell as well. I used to play in France too, so I would bump into him in the airport when we were going back to our respective clubs.

What's the best advice you've ever received? Years ago when I was in my second season of playing for Scotland, we were down at the Stoop in Twickenham playing England. Nolli Waterman came up to me at the end of the game and said, 'Well done, stick at it because you're playing well for your country.' It wasn't really advice but it was a boost to hear that from someone who is so experienced and well-known.

FACT FILE

Age 27 (26 June 1995)
Born Edinburgh
Position Full-back
Club Loughborough Lightning
Height 5ft 4in
Weight 9st 7lb
Instagram handle @itschloerollie

What's your guilty pleasure? I love anything that has caramel, toffee or fudge in it. If it's the sugariest thing you can possibly eat, I will want it. On a Sunday morning

WHAT'S ON YOUR PHONE

Last person you phoned
My mum

Last person you texted
Lana Skeldon, my best friend from the Scotland team

Last photo you took
A pancake I made to send to mum as I was very proud

Favourite social network
Instagram

Last app downloaded
My RPA. The Rugby Players Association app

Aiming high
Rollie has 52 Scotland caps

Role model
Referee Hollie Davidson

> **“I’ve got a phobia of electric shocks. Sometimes I have to get someone else to open a door”**

after I’ve played a game, I like to have a cinnamon bun heated up.

What was your first job? I worked for an excavation company and I started off as a labourer on the site. I drove a dump truck for about a year, 12 hours a day, Monday to Friday, up and down different tracks or quarries. People are always impressed by that one. It sounds like a long time to be doing it but at the same time, you have your freedom.

What would you have done if you hadn’t gone into rugby? I’d have gone into something like sports massage or therapy, that’s what I was studying before I went across to France to play.

Do you have any superstitions? I’ve got one pair of undershorts that I wear every single game. My mum got me them about seven years ago and I can’t play a game with a different pair. I feel like if anything were to go wrong it would be because I wasn’t wearing my undershorts. I would like to say they’re lucky but I’ve lost many games in them.

Do you have any surprising hidden talents you can share? I can make a raindrop noise with my mouth.

Do you have any nicknames? I’ve got ‘Chlo-Ro’, which has only come around in the last couple of years – my car number plate is very similar to that.

If you could be one team-mate, who would it be? Emily Scarratt (at Loughborough Lightning). I’d like to see what her life is like – it must be crazy with everything she’s got going on. Even to play like her for a day would be amazing.

Who would you like to be stuck in a lift with? Lee Evans, the comedian.

If you could have a superpower, what would it be? Teleporting. I travel a lot so it would make my day so much easier.

Any future goals? I’d like to become a referee after I finish playing, just to stay within rugby. Like Hollie Davidson, it would be good to become a well-known female referee who’s able to ref games all over the world at whatever level. RW

Favourite WhatsApp group
Familia, where me, Mum and Dad provide updates

Last song you played
Flowers by Miley Cyrus

Guilty pleasure app
TikTok definitely

8
7
4
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Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images & World Rugby**

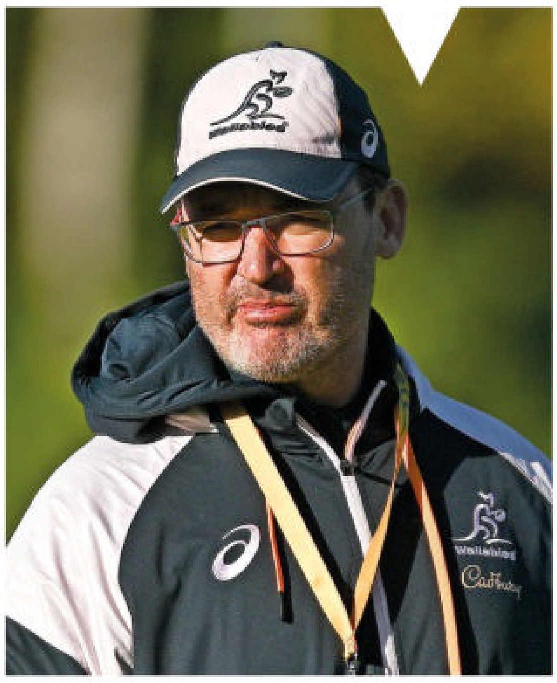
AROUND THE WORLD IN TEN STORIES

A selection of stories from across the rugby globe

1

Australia

Assistant coach Dan McKellar and scrum coach Petrus du Plessis have left their positions with the Wallabies, with the former taking over as Leicester head coach from July. McKellar (below) said: “The Tigers DNA is built around a combative style of rugby, with a strong set-piece and defence. That’s something I felt aligned strongly with myself.”



2

Chile

Selknam got their Super Rugby Americas campaign off to a winning start when the Santiago side crushed the American Raptors franchise 45-10. A decent crowd was given a show by the hosts, with No 8 Joaquín Miesi scoring three of Selknam’s seven tries. It bodes well ahead of Chile’s debut at the Rugby World Cup. The outfit is captained by *los Condores* back-three star Santiago Videla.

3

South Africa

Jaco Peyper (below), the two-time men’s World Cup referee, and women’s World Cup final referee Hollie Davidson have been named on the inaugural management committee elected to the representative body for international high-performance match officials. The group is chaired by Mark Egan and they’ll work with World Rugby.

4

Spain

Los Leones are on the look-out for a new figurehead to lead them. Incumbent head coach Santiago Santos, who has been in the job for ten years, will leave his position after the Rugby Europe Championship concludes.

5

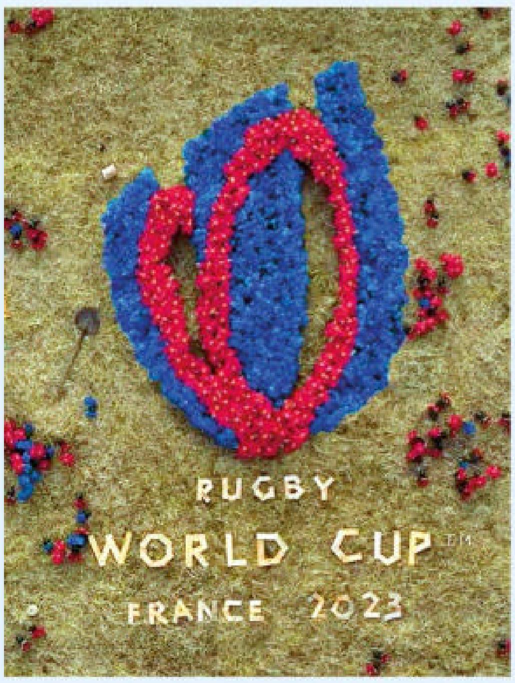
Qatar

Qatar's men emerged as champions of Asia Rugby Division Three West after defeating their regional rivals Iran 40-12 at the Al Ain Amblers Rugby Club in Abu Dhabi. Hooker Wade Lotter scored a hat-trick to help Qatar reach the Championship play-offs.

6

Barbados

Rugby Americas North have started a new collaboration with ChildFund Rugby, launching their 'Grass roots to Global' initiative aimed at empowering girls and women in rugby. There have been two forums so far, in Barbados and Mexico. St Lucia is next up at the end of March.



7

France

Rugby World Cup 2023 was honoured as a "special guest" at the recent 59th edition of the International Agricultural Fair in Paris. At the Parc des Expositions Porte de Versailles, the Hall One entrance was dressed in the colours of Rugby World Cup 2023 and the Webb Ellis Cup was displayed to visitors on 27 February. Throughout the World Cup, farmers' markets will be set up in the competition's celebration areas and will provide local products sourced through organic farming. France 2023 runs from 8 September to 28 October.

LAST STOPS

8

Canada

The Barbarians have appointed Kingsley Jones (above) as Eddie Jones's assistant coach for this summer's Killik Cup match against the World XV. The game takes place on Sunday 28 May at Twickenham.

9

Fiji

Fijian Drua have brought in winger Eroni Sau (above) for the Super Rugby Pacific season as a replacement for sacked star Vinaya Habosi. Nicknamed 'Sledgehammer', Sau comes in from France's ProD2 side Provence.

10

Japan

Pumas head coach Michael Cheika has left his role as DoR at Japan League One's NEC Green Rockets (above). Lack of time spent with the elite Japanese side is believed to be a key factor behind the decision.

THE SECRET REFEREE

Cameras lied for Lowe try

Our former elite official explains why the wrong decision was made on an Irish score

THIS YEAR'S Six Nations has provided some thrilling fixtures and a number of interesting refereeing decisions, on and off the field. Happily, most have been correct.

The referee in the middle is just one of four neutral officials at each Test as well as the locally appointed fourth and fifth officials. And there's another person who can have a massive impact on the outcome of a game: the TV producer.

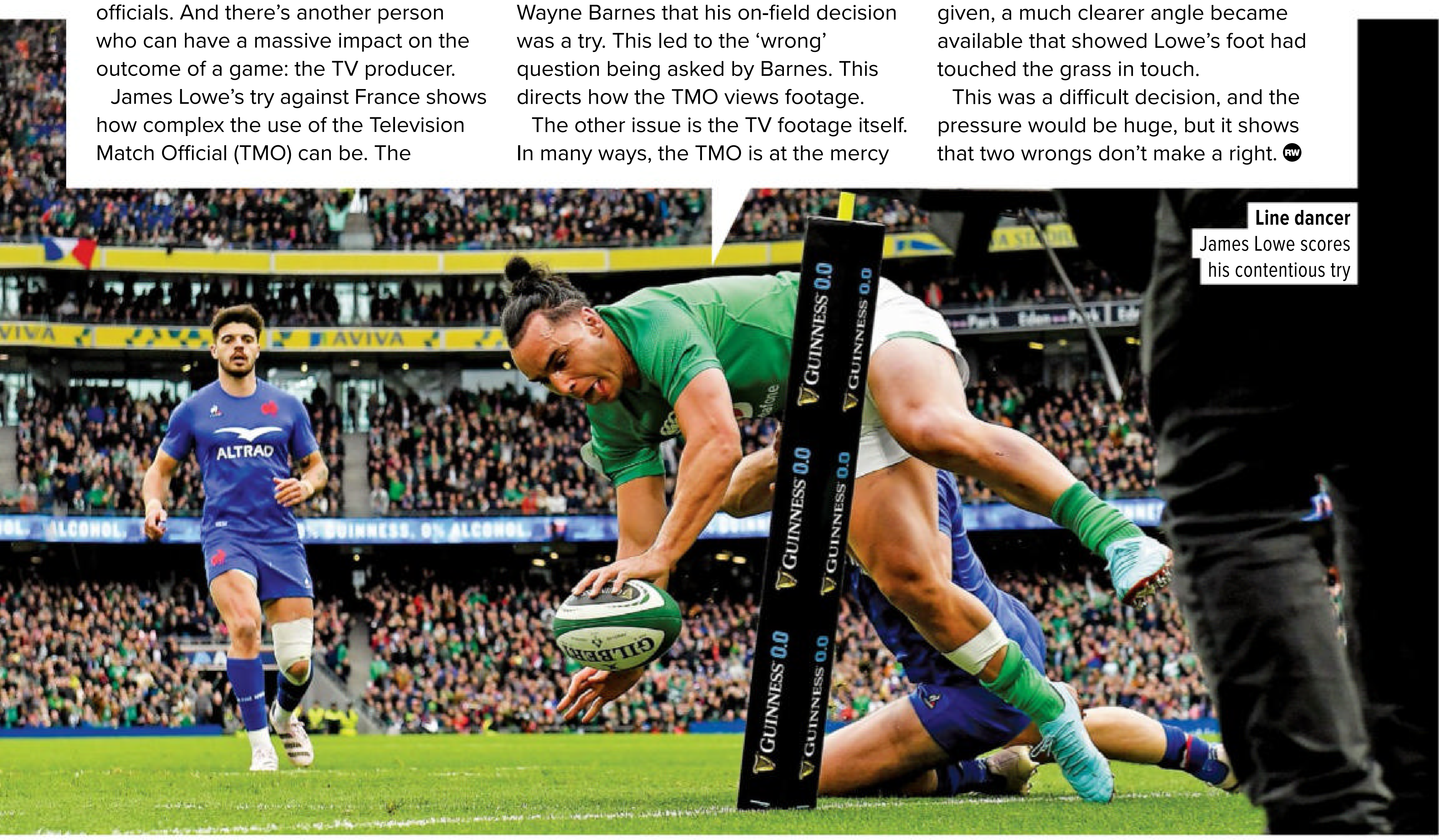
James Lowe's try against France shows how complex the use of the Television Match Official (TMO) can be. The interaction between the four officials is part and parcel of TV coverage but what you perhaps don't appreciate is the dialogue and furious activity going on between the TMO and the TV company.

It's widely accepted that awarding the Lowe try was a mistake. He put a foot in touch. But the first error was the assistant referee informing referee Wayne Barnes that his on-field decision was a try. This led to the 'wrong' question being asked by Barnes. This directs how the TMO views footage.

The other issue is the TV footage itself. In many ways, the TMO is at the mercy of the TV company and they must be sure all available camera angles are seen before the final decision is made. Some companies (and even countries!) are better than others at providing this.

In this instance, it seems the TMO, New Zealand's Brendon Pickerill, didn't do due diligence on all the available footage because after the try was given, a much clearer angle became available that showed Lowe's foot had touched the grass in touch.

This was a difficult decision, and the pressure would be huge, but it shows that two wrongs don't make a right.



Line dancer
James Lowe scores his contentious try

SCHOOLS ROUND UP

IN CELEBRATION of the 200th anniversary of rugby, **Rugby School** will host an International U18s Sevens Tournament on the weekend of 25-26 March. Countries involved include Australia, Canada, Chile, England, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa and Wales.

England Touch had organised an event for the **Independent Schools Association** on Friday 12 May at Maidenhead RFC, but due to a surge of enquiries from other schools, the event has extended invites to *all* schools. The same applies to a second event in SW London on 15 May.

Pupils at **Ashville Prep School** in Harrogate had a nice surprise when Montpellier star Zach Mercer paid a visit. Zach's father Gary is head of rugby at Ashville College.

In late February, the *Irish Examiner* live streamed the action from the **Pinergy Munster Schools Boys Senior Cup** semi-finals on their website.

JARGON BUSTER

Bind

To grab hold of – and keep hold of – a team-mate or opponent. You must be bound in scrums, mauls and when clearing out at the ruck.

PICS Getty Images

NEW STAR COLUMNIST!

KEN OWENS

The Wales captain who has represented the Lions and Scarlets with distinction

"As captain you want to do right by the boys"

Tough day
Wales lost heavily against Scotland

IT'S OBVIOUSLY been a tough couple of weeks in Welsh rugby. You have a lot of conversations around how we approach media messaging and that is a responsibility we share around the senior players group with the national team. And there are obviously a whole host of contract issues – as a captain you want to voice the players' concerns and opinions around that.

You want to do right by the boys, as captaining your country is an honour.

You grow up as a young boy in West Wales and want to play for your country. You get to play. And then you get to 50 caps. And then you get to captain your country and lead them out and it's 'Wow!' For me, it's a surreal dream.

I've been fortunate enough to play under some of the greatest captains in the game over the years. You think of Chico Hopkins playing behind Gareth Edwards for so many years and he got one cap. But you're behind one of the greatest and so you can live with that. Well, I've played under some of the best captains Wales have ever had.

The match against Ireland was my first time as Wales captain. I thought it was going to be quite emotional, but I managed to get a lot of that out the week before. I got down to business. The anthem is something special to me and, whether I was captain or not, it would always be the same, so I was pretty prepared for that.

The first time I was ever captain was with the Carmarthenshire West U16s team, and I'd just been dropped from Wales U16s, back down to county level. I bet I was erratic then, trying to do everything myself and talk too much!

When you're young, you try to tell everyone what they should be doing, how we should be playing. Perhaps throw a couple of random quotes in there, like I'm in *Any Given Sunday*. You look back now and you think, 'I was actually talking a load of s***!' One of the captains at school, I remember, he spoke so fast and so passionately. To this day I have no idea what he said. There were a few other boys who had the same clichés all the time – it's funny now but at the time you thought, 'Yeah! That's what we're going to do!'

Thankfully with Wales we have a really strong leadership group. And you get a sense of what needs to be said and when it needs to be said. Other leaders will sense that they need to say something because one person needs the pressure off and they're doing a lot of talking. Leaders take the pressure off each other.

Something I've realised as I've developed my captaincy at the Scarlets over the years is that you don't have to have the last say all the time. You need to be comfortable with going, 'It's been said, let's crack on.' We may need something to be voiced, if someone's getting a first cap or backs are against the wall, but often it's spur of the moment.

Sometimes it needs more than that. We've had it at the Scarlets recently where we need a bit of passion. You've got to judge it, and it could come from anyone. One stands out from half-time in Paris in 2019, when our S&C coach Huw Bennett did it. We were on an unbeaten run, full of confidence, and at half-time against France we weren't even in the game (0-16). We were all perplexed and then ex-player Huw spoke. It changed everything. And that was momentum for the Grand Slam.

But captaincy isn't just that side. I've talked to manager Martyn Williams about how the pre-game anthem walks work. There are protocols with the royals. There is ten minutes to prepare post-match speeches in the president's lounge. And then with Netflix being involved, I'm part of the plans on where, when and how they can film what we do. Because with everything, you need to make sure everyone is comfortable. There's always plenty going on!

RISING STARS

Interviews **Josh Graham & Alan Pearey** // Pictures **Fever Pitch, Getty Images & Andy Watts/JMP**

1 GRACE WHITE

Age **19 (8 Sept 2003)** Born **Taunton, Somerset** Position **Wing** Club **Bristol Bears** Country **England**

How did you get involved in rugby? I started playing at school. My teacher, Gareth Waterfield, was coach at Winscombe RFC, so soon got me out on a Sunday. I was 12.

Did you instantly like it? It's been in my family, so I don't think there was ever a choice as to whether I was going to like it or not! My dad (Mark) was a winger for Bristol, which has been an inspiration for me. And he played for England Colts.

Did you play other sports? I played football until I was 15, but it fell off for rugby.

What positions have you played? I'm a wing but hope to end up at 12. That might depend on whether I can sort out my left-hand pass!

How did you get to play for Bristol? I went to a county/Centre of Excellence (C of E) trial and Dave Ward was the assessor there. He brought me in when I was 17.

What are your strengths? Speed and footwork. I'm stronger than I look, I'd say.

How about any work-ons? My left-hand pass. And communicating – just to have the confidence to call things like cross-field kicks, demanding the ball rather than waiting for it to come my way. And also hunting for work: having the confidence to move position and pop up somewhere the opposition don't expect me.

Who helps you on the pitch? Amber Reed is brill. She knows everything and is one of my role models. When my little sister was five, she sent Amber a letter saying what an inspiration she was. Amber sent her a boot bag that she had signed. When it arrived in the post, I stole it straightaway. I've never told her that!

Biggest influence in your career? As well as Dad, definitely Gareth. At times he was my C of E coach and he still sends me messages. And Rich Hynes, the C of E coach, still supports me too.

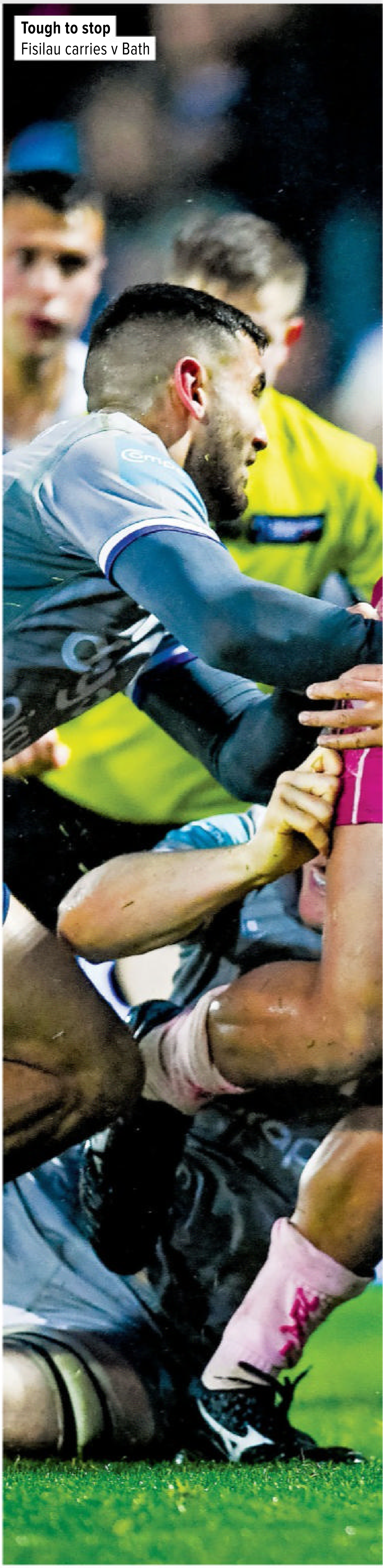
Any goals? I'm in the England U20s squad this season and there's a match in France, so I'm determined to make the team for that one. Longer term, I'd love to make it to England.

What do you do away from rugby? I'm a teaching assistant at Hugh Sexey Middle School. I work with a girl with quite severe learning difficulties, helping her learn to read and write. I run the girls' rugby team there too. I want to go to uni in 2024, to study forensic science. Hopefully at Exeter or Bristol.

RW VERDICT

White has been a regular scorer in just her second season. She recognises the weaker areas of her game yet also has the ambition to aim high. Will she achieve England honours one day? If not, it won't be for want of trying.

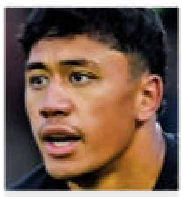
Try time
Scoring v Quins



Tough to stop
Fisilau carries v Bath

Packexe
SAMR
comms
PREMIERSHIP CUP

2 GREG FISILAU



Age 19 (9 July 2003) Born Plymouth Position Back-row Club Exeter Chiefs Country England

When did you first play rugby? My dad (Keni Fisilau, ex-Plymouth and Tonga centre) wanted me to get into it once I was old enough for contact and that was at Devonport in Plymouth, I think U10s. **What attracted you to the sport?** Dad was training me as soon as I could crawl, he was adamant I'd play rugby. I was soft growing up. I wasn't the hardest tackler, I just liked having the ball in my hands. **What positions have you played?** I was a 12 at first. When they realised I wasn't quick enough, I got moved to hooker as I could throw the ball. I got too tall for hooker and was getting folded in the scrums, so I drifted into the back row. **Did you play other sports?** Rugby was the main one but coming through school at St Edward's, Oxford, I was goalkeeper for the hockey second team. I was terrified – when people fire rock-hard balls at you it's not a good feeling! **When did the rep rugby start?** I played a bit for Oxfordshire, then did Wasps academy a year young. I did the AASE programme for Wasps at City of Oxford College. My mum worked there in finance, so I couldn't get into trouble as that didn't stop her from coming down to give me a hiding when I needed it! **Any childhood heroes?** Dad tops the list but I loved watching Jonah Lomu. He couldn't be stopped, pretty much. **How did the move to Exeter happen?** Halfway through my second year in Wasps' senior academy, everything that happened (Wasps' insolvency) started. It wasn't nice to see. Leaving Wasps was tough. Rob Baxter got in touch and it was top of my list. I'm from the area, so I wanted to go back to Devon. **What are your strengths?** Carrying. I try to have as many involvements as I can. **And work-ons?** I can be guilty of making mistakes by switching off. So just having that mental strength to stay switched on for the whole 80 minutes.

RW VERDICT

Fisilau has slotted into the Exeter team quicker than even he expected after the upheaval at Wasps. With some standout displays for England U20 and Sam Simmonds off to France, he will only grow in stature.

FACE-OFF

Do men's and women's double headers work?

MARK DARBON

The Northampton chief executive

"WE HAVE been pleased with the two we've done and both times comfortably more than 2,000 people stayed for the women's match. They work well. It's important to get the second game to start as quickly as possible, so you don't lose the crowd. There is a growing appetite to engage with it.

"Our view is you can't have a model dependent on double headers, you have got to have a mix. We have staged five or six stand-alone Loughborough Lightning games at Saints and the average crowd has been comfortably over 1,000 compared to a couple of hundred at their previous ground.

Double trouble
Barbarians women played after the men cancelled, 2021

"The players love playing at Franklin's Gardens and being part of a big match day alongside Saints and the feedback has been really positive. We make sure the women have the same experience as the men, with the same welcome, the fireworks, music and guard of honour. We are determined to make the experience equitable.

"There is going to be greater alignment next season between men's Premiership teams and those in the Allianz 15s, so there is an opportunity to think about scheduling to maximise the attention on both games. We definitely sold a few more tickets for the Saints game against Sale because we had the double header against Loughborough. The women's game had a halo effect on the men – there's an opportunity to do some really good stuff for both supporter bases."

CATHERINE SPENCER

The former England captain

"WE HAD one game before the men played at Twickenham which didn't work at all because people needed tickets for the men to get in, and only about 200 people were there watching when we were on. It was awful. Then the other games were played after the men.

"The challenge was that people didn't know about it. Even people I knew who had been at the men's game didn't know it was on and left by the time our game started. It helps create atmosphere and build a crowd but it has to be marketed properly. If people buy a ticket for the men's game they should know there is a women's game. And with games after the men, it was free to walk into Twickenham and watch but no one knew about that either. It was frustrating and quite disheartening. I remember an article when the writer couldn't get into the women's game because people on the gate didn't know it was on!

"You'd do the warm-up and start the first half and suddenly see the stadium begin to empty as the game kicked off. That was tricky.

"I like that the Women's Six Nations is now separate from the men – previously it was a bit of a shadow. Now it's gone into April and they've sold a lot of tickets for the stand-alone Twickenham game against France. It shows that you can build a crowd without hanging on to the coat-tails of the men's game.

"At Premiership level, double headers can work but internationally it is best to keep men and women separate."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Send your views to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

WHAT GOES ON TOUR...

[Goes in Rugby World]

WAISALE SEREVI won MVP at the 1989 Hong Kong Sevens but got no special treatment when Fiji returned in 1990. The inclusion in the party of the coach's father meant Serevi, as the baby of the squad, had to share a room with his half-back partner Pauliasi and his uncle Vesi. With just two beds, Serevi slept on the floor.

Fiji won the tournament but three years later fell to England in the Sevens World Cup semi-finals after misjudging the cold of Edinburgh, as we learn from the 2018 book on Serevi, *The King of Sevens*.

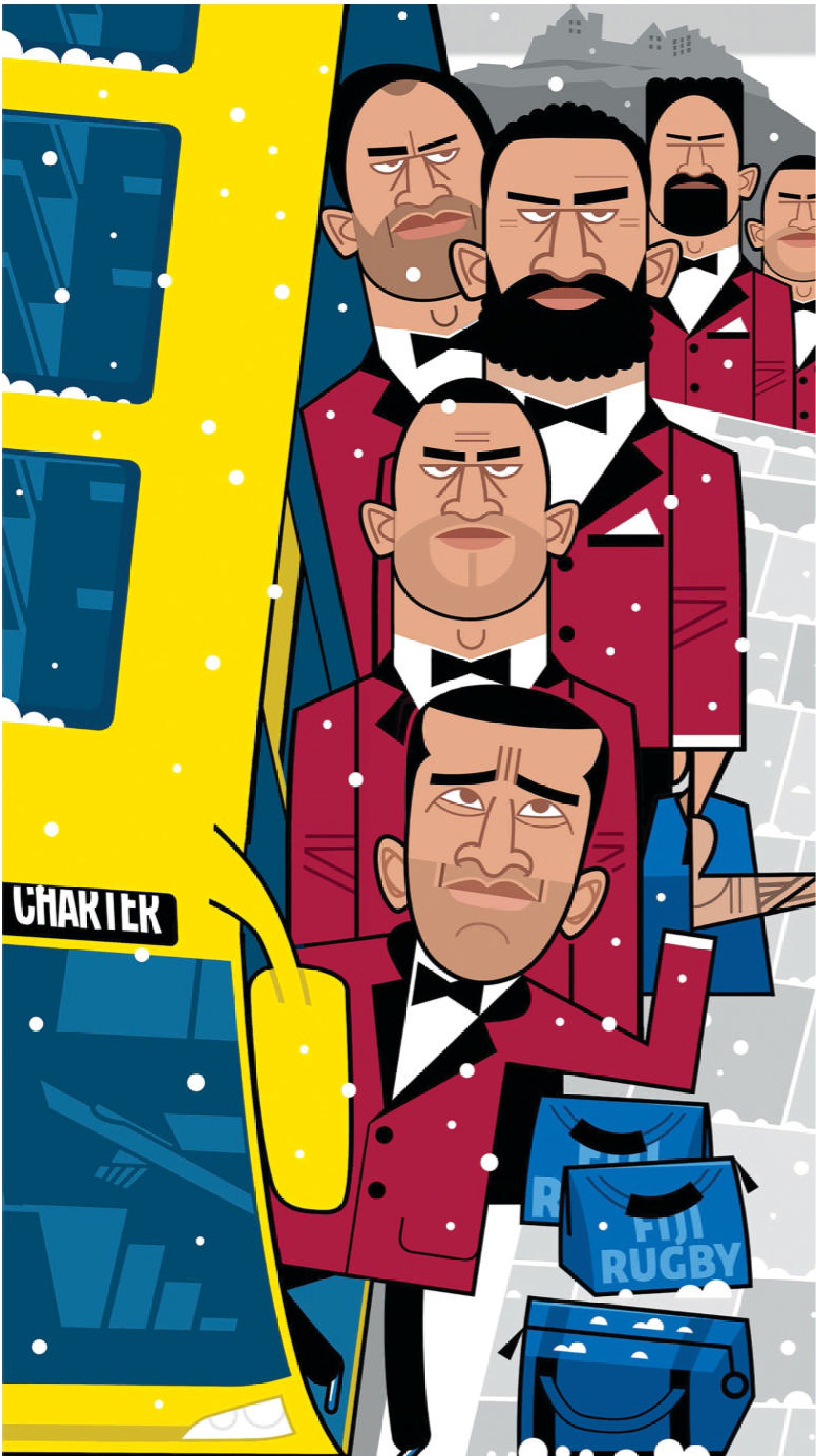
'No Fijian player owned a jacket, so each stacked on several layers of cotton jerseys hoping they'd suffice for that moment of truth when they stepped off the bus.

'At first it seemed like someone was throwing rocks or gravel at them. After a hasty reconnaissance seeking out mischievous youths, it dawned on Serevi that these small stones were falling from the sky.

'The team was on the precipice of a full-blown hailstorm. The boys beat a hasty retreat to their bus and dispatched the team manager to find some suitable cold-weather gear for the next excursion into Scotland's freezing conditions.

'Somehow that communication got horribly scrambled. When the team later returned to their hotel, the manager presented them with his solution. The players were crying out for solid, waterproof athletic wear but instead were handed 12 dinner-suit jackets, resplendent in a maroon finish!

'With no other options, the squad soldiered on through their 'dinner party' training session the next day wondering how they'd finished up in this 'formal' predicament...' RW



WE WON'T TELL, PROMISE...

We love hearing your stories and want to celebrate the characters of our great game in What Goes On Tour... If you have an amusing tale to tell, drop us a line. Mark your email 'Tour Tale' and send it to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

ILLUSTRATION David Lyttleton

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images**

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO…

TRIUMPH AT TWICKENHAM

We hear from those lucky enough to win at the home of English rugby

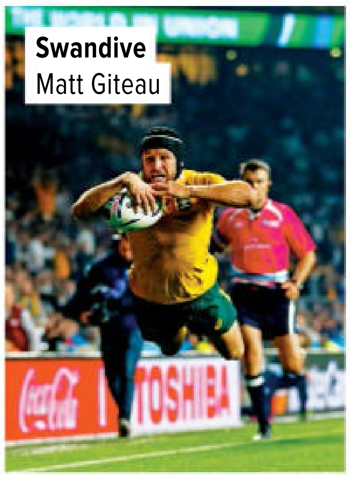
DOWN IN the bowels of Twickenham post Calcutta Cup, victorious Scotland scrum-half Ben White was explaining that his usual trip to London Irish training took him on a route that gave pause to daydreams.

"Driving past the stadium, it's been on my mind that I'd love to play here against England," he said of Twickenham. "I just wanted that opportunity and I'm very grateful to Gregor Townsend for giving it to me. I know what it means to the fans, I spoke to a few supporters at the end."

And no doubt what they were saying to him would be barely intelligible. In 2021, Scotland won at Twickenham for the first time in 38 years. Wins there are rare. So to do so back-to-back – and in White's case to play a starring role and score the first time he ever played there – is the stuff of jibberish and fantasy. For many reasons, winning there is tough.

In 2015, Australia faced the Rugby World Cup hosts England at their home ground. After romping to a 33-13 victory, then-Wallabies coach Michael Cheika said: "Here you've got to keep the opposition out of the game and the crowd out of the game, because it's like a tsunami coming at you, that noise. We wanted to get into it and play as hard as we could. We knew it would be hard – it's England's backyard and the atmosphere was outrageously loud."

Worth the drive
Ben White after scoring


Swandive
Matt Giteau

Recent victors
The Springboks

The atmosphere at Twickenham is a hot topic during the 2023 instalment of the Six Nations. A video of one inebriated fan went viral after the Calcutta match, with him disgusted that his fellow supporters could be outsung by the Scottish. And in his column for the *Daily Mail*, former England boss Clive Woodward wrote: “Twickenham is turning into the world’s biggest pub. For many England fans, watching their team has now become a pretty unpleasant experience.

“It is a complex problem and I don’t claim to have all the solutions, but this is a hugely important issue and talking point — not just for English rugby but for the game as a whole.

“I witnessed this problem during the autumn Internationals and hoped that it might be better during the Six Nations.”

When the home side are winning, perhaps both of the above are seen as less of an issue. But in very recent memory, England have lost to Scotland, South Africa and Argentina – the latter once again masterminded by Cheika, who seems to have a knack for winning at England’s HQ. And during that Springboks win, boos rang around.

But when things are rolling, the noise from 82,000 people swells. It was present in the second half of the drawn match against the All Blacks in November. Capturing it is important for the home side – it’s why when he first came in, England boss Steve Borthwick urged fans to make themselves heard.

“I ask the supporters to be behind this team,” he said. “This is the first step in this next chapter of the England team. And I think this is a group of players that care so much about the England rugby team. I know I do, so I ask them to get behind this team and lift this team, as they always do.”

So how treasured are memories of wins there? In a column in the *Irish Times* last year, centre Gordon D’Arcy wrote of how fortunate he felt to have played in three of Ireland’s four wins at Twickenham since 1996 (Ireland would make it five wins only days after D’Arcy’s column). And in his last-ever Test for France in 2005, centre Brian Liebenberg netted a victory.

“I remember it was a very tough game and neither us nor the English team really ever took full control of the game,” Liebenberg tells *Rugby World* of that day. “We both had our opportunities but both sides stayed in contention. What kept us in the game was a fine kicking performance by Dimitri Yachvili. It went down to the wire with Charlie Hodgson missing a last-minute drop-goal attempt. So to be honest the game could have swung either way until the end.

“I don’t think it was a very spectacular game to be seen from the stands but a classic England v France game where both teams kept fighting till the end.

“I don’t remember much talk about any records building up to the game. We just knew it was going to be a big game and tried to prepare as best we could, as any French team would do before playing in Twickenham. So in that respect maybe there was less expectation that year and less pressure to bring back a win.

“We knew we had to defend well to counter the English attack. They were very good when they had the ball in hand and could easily go 80 metres to score points. If we defended well and kept the score down, we were always in with a chance and that’s exactly what happened. Maybe there was a bit more luck on our side too that day!”

Trips down memory lane are always satisfying, particularly around the Six Nations. But how does former Stade Français centre Liebenberg view the challenge at Twickenham today?

“In today’s circumstances I would suppose that the English team might be a bit more under pressure and nervous to be able to play and get a positive result going into the game. So this could affect the atmosphere, I’m sure. But it won’t take much to get the crowd behind them and I think the French are very aware of that too. When we played I think it was more just in the game than leading up to the match that we felt the tension in the stands. This is a great opportunity for England – who are more like underdogs now – to get a very important win against a very strong French side. This is why I think the atmosphere is going to be electric.”

The thing about electric atmospheres, though, is that someone always gets shocked. Will it be the visitors?

DID YOU KNOW?

The first time England lost at home in the Six Nations was in 2004, when they fell 19-13 to Ireland and Ronan O’Gara’s boot. It was Ireland’s first win at Twickenham since 1994, when they won 13-12.

Home from home
Australia in 2015

> “It’s like a tsunami coming at you, that noise. We wanted to get in there and play as hard as we could”

THE RUGBY RANT

Weight banding can arrest the game's decline, says reader and author Terry Breverton

Heavy artillery
France's Uini Atonio weighs about 150kg

PICS Inpho

IN THE early Sixties, I played hooker in school and openside for Barry Youth, then over the next 20-odd years I played in every back position. In my 20s the Welsh backs were all Lions: Gareth, with Barry John or Phil Bennett outside; centres Dawes, Bergiers or Arthur Lewis; wings Gerald Davies, JJ Williams, Keri Jones, Maurice Richards and John Bevan; and full-back JPR.

My height of 5ft 10in, and weight of 11st 12lb, would not have precluded me from being picked for the Lions instead of those players. Forget the little matters of talent, training and dedication for the moment. Putting on a stone, I could even have played openside.

These days it's almost impossible for someone of my 'normal' size to play Test rugby. In 1955 the average weight of an international player was 13st 5lb (85kg). By 2015 the average had risen 24% to 16st 8lb (105kg). In the English Premiership, backs now average 14st 9lb (93kg) and forwards average 17st 11lb (113kg).

Of all positions, hookers have seen the biggest weight gain as they no longer have to strike for the ball – many hookers are now bigger than their props. We're seeing a boom-boom-bash approach to rugby – big blokes hitting big blokes repeatedly – and with more and more long-term injuries.

Taking the giants out will make the game far more attractive, taking us back to Internationals where the game ebbed and flowed without constant hold-ups. We need to take the weight out of rugby and replace it with talent.

We know there is a big drop-off in players when they hit 12 years old and 'hits' become common. We also know that junior clubs are struggling for players and financial stability. The game is losing popularity except for Internationals, and half the spectators are usually more concerned with getting bladdered than watching a kickfest.

In November 2021, World Rugby included weight-based banding among optional law changes in the community game: 'Rugby should remain a game "for all shapes and sizes" and diversity within a team makes it stronger. However, in some countries with higher levels of multiculturalism and challenges such as perceptions of risk and player transition from school to senior rugby, weight-based competitions may assist retention.'

This verbiage gives little. Players are too big and rugby too brutal for normal people to wish to progress up the ladder. I propose an average weight limit of 15st at Test level and 14st at top-club level. If you want big backs, the pack must suffer. It would create brilliant games.

Give rugby back to the people. RW

> **"We need to take the weight out of rugby and replace it with talent"**

HAVE YOUR SAY

What gets your goat? Let us know on Facebook or tweet @Rugbyworldmag

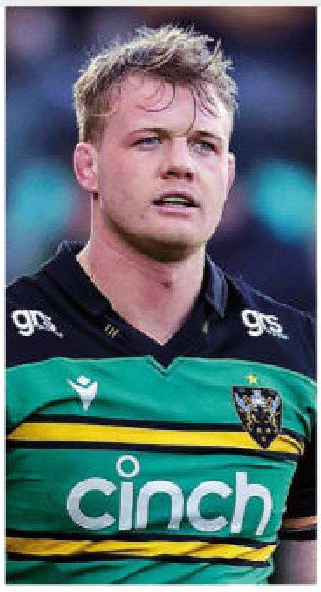
SHORT PASS

WASPS REBORN
Wasps will play in next season's Championship after RFU approval.

ON THE BUS
Bristol Bisons, the South-West's first gay and inclusive rugby team, has found a new sponsor in First Bus.

OFF TO FRANCE
England lock David Ribbans (right), 27, will leave Northampton at the end of the season to join Toulon.

O'MAHONY DEAL
Peter O'Mahony, who's closing in on 100 Irish caps, has extended his IRFU contract until the end of next season.



NEW SHARKS
Miami Sharks have become the latest franchise to join the MLR. They will compete from 2024.

HELPING JUDGE
England players from the 1991-92 Grand Slam teams will host a fundraising lunch at Twickenham on 28 April for Paul 'Judge' Rendall, who has MND.

LOCKED IN
Newcastle wing Adam Radwan has signed a new three-year deal.

CHARITY SUCCESS
Wooden Spoon's Ruby Rugby Ball raised over £70,000 for charity.

INSIDE THE MIND OF... ADAM JONES

Interview **Josh Graham** // Picture **Getty Images**

Delve deeper into the Wales and Lions prop turned Harlequins scrum coach

"It's definitely tougher to **take a loss** as a coach than as a player. I used to be able to park things easily but it's way harder now."

"The **best advice** I received was from Mike Phillips with the Lions in 2009. One morning, we were doing a World XV and I'd basically put the whole South African team in. He told me if I wanted to be the best prop in the world, then I had to stop giving these people too much respect. I realised he was right."

"I do really like my boxing, so I'd love to meet **Tyson Fury** from the sporting world. I'd just like to have a chat and a beer with him. Really randomly, Tyson Fury's security guard is actually old Welsh second-row Bradley Davies's best mate!"

"With the **Lions** in 2009 I got pally with a couple of the English boys. I tried to embrace as much of it as possible, and see as much of South Africa as I could and have a few pints with the legendary Simon Shaw."

"Lou Reed was the **funniest team-mate** I ever had. I had a year in Cardiff that would have been really tough without him. Very good sense of humour. He looks a bit funny as well, which helped. Just a great bloke."

"The hardest part about being a coach is the **match day**. You just put your plans in place and you're kind of reliant on what the boys are doing, and it's tough. The hardest bit is that you're not able to physically impact anything."

"The best tour I went on was with **Abercrave Youth** in 1998. A couple of boys burned the top floor of the hotel down by mistake. I was kind of just happy to be there."

"The **proudest moment** of my career was winning three Grand Slams. I never thought I'd win one! It was pretty special to be in a select band of only 13 Welshmen to have won three."

"Outside of rugby, I don't do much really, just relax. It's hard to believe but I like to **train**, so I can eat what I want. If I don't, I feel a bit 'ugh'. That's probably my only real hobby."

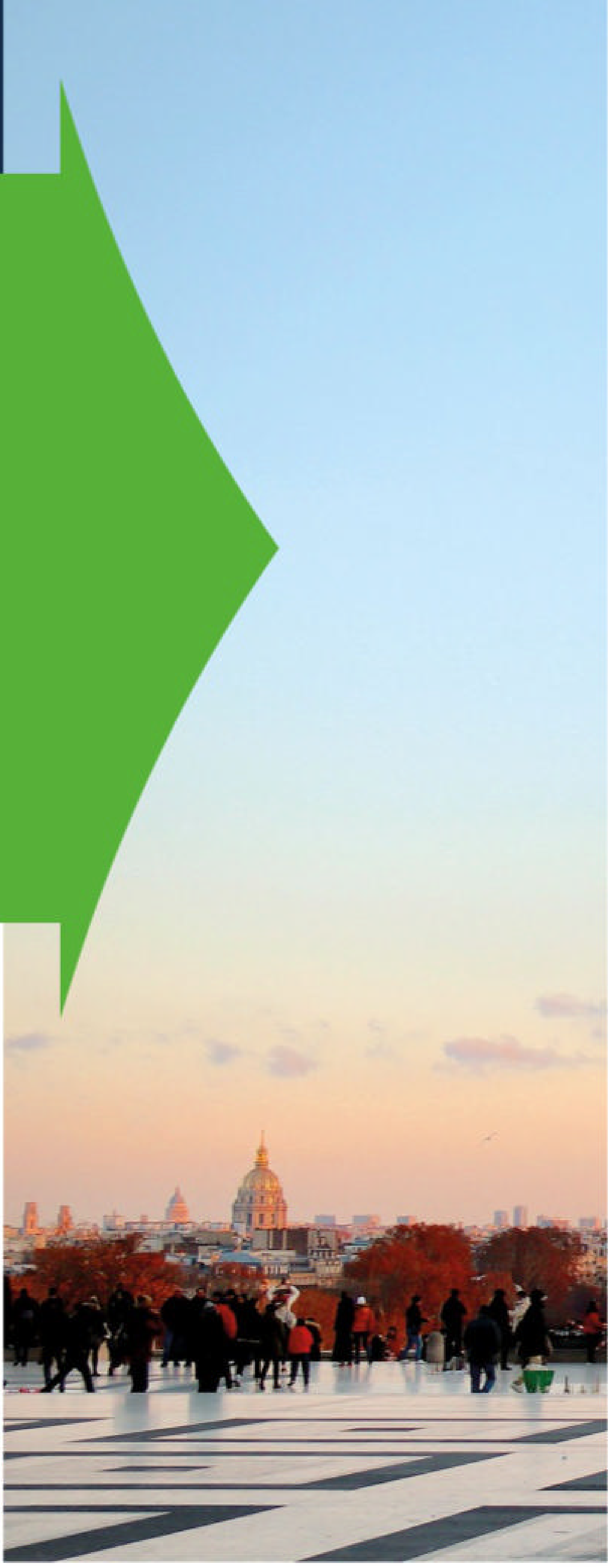
"Niggle is niggle in rugby, I don't really see the point in it because you can't do anything. The intimidation factor probably comes from being physical in the carry and tackling. I don't see where **niggle** gets you but I guess some people must do."

"The best thing about being a **coach** is the fact you've got the whole week, and the build-up to the game, so you're still involved in things. There's still this little kind of buzz and the excitement that comes with it. It's just the 80 minutes that is a bit of a pain."

Promotion

EXPERIENCE THE BEST OF FRANCE

Thinking of going to France for Rugby World Cup 2023? Come with **Gullivers Sports Travel** and explore our guide on the charm of each city and why you should visit



① BORDEAUX

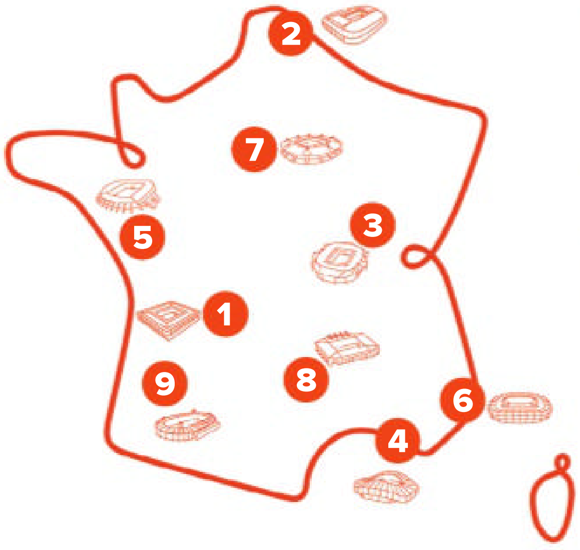
If you love wine this is the place to be. Take a tour around one of the many vineyards in Bordeaux or visit La Cité du Vin, where the complex world of wine is explored in this ground-breaking museum. Digital guides lead you around 20 themed sections covering everything from vine cultivation to grape varieties.

② LILLE

Are you someone who loves art and culture? Then Lille may be just for you. Transformed from an industrial centre to a glittering cultural and design hub, Lille became the world's design capital in 2020. It is home to Palais des Beaux Arts, a fine art museum which houses France's second-largest collection, with works by Manet, Rubens and Van Dyck.

③ LYON

Love your food? Lyon is one spot you don't want to miss. Known as France's capital of cuisine, there are plenty of French and local delicacies to tuck into. If you want to taste as much as possible then Les Halles de Lyon Paul Bocuse is the place for you to visit. This famous indoor food market is populated by nearly five-dozen food stalls selling every French gourmet delight imaginable. *Bon appétit!*



④ MARSEILLE

For grit, beautiful architecture and stunning crystal-clear waters, Marseille is the place. To view it all, head on up to Basilique Notre Dame de la Garde, an opulent 19th-century Romano-Byzantine basilica that occupies the city's highest point. Built upon a 16th-century fort and 13th-century chapel, take in breathtaking views of the city whilst marvelling at the basilica's ornate marble and mosaics.

⑤ NANTES

From France's foremost port in the 18th century to industrial centre in the 19th, and now a cultural hub, Nantes knows how to reinvent itself. Check out Les Machines de l'île de Nantes. This quirky workshop has mechanical contraptions displayed in plant-filled hothouses. You can ride the 12m mechanical elephant or whirl around on the gigantic carousel.

⑥ NICE

Food, culture, opulence and stunning seaside location – what more could you ask of Nice? Take it easy by enjoying the sunshine and gently lapping shores with a stroll along the Promenade des Anglais. This paved promenade runs for 4km, with palm tree-lined paths.

⑦ PARIS

Iconic landmarks, classic bistros, beautiful boutiques and more than a few monument-lined boulevards – there is so much to love about Paris. Don't miss the city's well-known attractions but try it with a spin. Whether you visit the Eiffel Tower at night and visit its Michelin-starred restaurant or partake in a treasure hunt around Musée du Louvre, you'll never tire of Paris.

View of an icon
See the Eiffel Tower

Old foes, new address
Scotland and Ireland will meet in Paris

⑧ SAINT-ETIENNE

Saint-Etienne's passion for design can be found in every corner of the city. It's even earned itself a place on the list of UNESCO Creative Cities. Symbolising this love for architecture is Cité du Design. Covered in large triangular pieces, this ultramodern building is held up with steel space trusses and holds a network of exhibition galleries.

⑨ TOULOUSE

Toulouse is picture perfect with blushing brick buildings and ochre rooftops surrounded by the winding Garonne River and mighty Canal du Midi. Get yourself lost around the enchanting Vieux Quartier with its jumble of pretty shopfronts, churches and bistros. Find a sun-dappled spot in one of the squares.

RUGBY WORLD CUP FRANCE 2023
OFFICIAL TRAVEL AGENT

WALES EYE A HAT-TRICK

Alan Pearey reports on the upcoming World Deaf Rugby Sevens World Cup in Argentina

Victorious Wales Deaf at the 2018 Sevens World Cup

WALES WILL go for a treble of sorts when the World Deaf Rugby Sevens World Cup kicks off in Córdoba, Argentina (5-9 April). It's the third Deaf Rugby World Cup and Wales won both previous editions, a 15-a-side tournament in New Zealand in 2002 and the inaugural Sevens World Cup in Sydney five years ago, when England were defeated 21-15 in the final.

The logistics of organising a 15s event, which requires more players and more days in the schedule, means World Deaf Rugby is focusing on sevens as a way to embrace their expanding family. The governing body has more than 20 members and many of them will be in Córdoba.

Co-captain Jon Cudd rises

Wales, England, Japan, Australia, Fiji, Kenya, South Africa and perhaps Ghana and PNG will compete alongside the hosts in the men's competition, while the women's event has also ballooned since 2018, when England and Australia played a five-match series. There will be Barbarians teams, too, so players from other nations can participate.

Welsh linchpins include Shaun Miles, a stalwart of Premiership club Llandovery, and the joint captains, Ipswich-based Wes Pooley and Jon Cudd, brother of Dragons legend Nic.

To be eligible, players must have an average of at least 40 decibels of hearing loss across both ears. Random hearing tests will be conducted at the tournament.

Some players, like Cudd, are totally deaf in one ear but okay in the other. Many have cochlear implants or have had hearing aids since they were little. Wing Will Thomas was born deaf and relies on a sign language interpreter at training, and hand signals during games.

The referees also use signals – for example, two hands in the air means 'stop'. It's a branch of rugby that most never see. "It's probably a bit under the radar," says Wales team manager James Savastano, who like the players is forking out £1,400 for flights and kit to attend the World Cup. "Wales Deaf Rugby is a charity, even though it's affiliated to the WRU. We get Macron kit vouchers and stuff like that, but travel or tournament expenses are run out of the charity.

"Each country can only enter if they're affiliated to their national union because that gives them the insurance. And I know that's been a stumbling block. But those things are moving forward now."

Who are the main contenders? "I'd imagine it will be us, England, and, thinking of Sydney, Fiji were good. Typically Fijian, monsters who can run!"

South Africa didn't have a full team last time. Now they're coached by ex-Boks coach Peter de Villiers and picked their squad after nationwide coaching clinics. Deaf Rugby deserves your attention. RW

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

BOB CASEY

Age **44** Position **Second-row** Teams **Leinster, London Irish & Ireland**

"I'VE BEEN back in Dublin for nearly six years working for Korn Ferry, who deal with recruitment, strategy planning and development. I stopped playing in 2012, it was planned but a shock to the system.

"I worked in a business development role for Powerday, a recycling company, which was a really good experience. Then a consortium took over London Irish and there was a chance to come back as operations director with a view to becoming CEO. I had a degree in commerce under my belt. I was chief executive from 2015 to 2017, which was challenging. I was lucky to be involved in the new ground in Brentford. I still do the annual St Patrick's Day trip there.

"I'd wanted to come home and I was introduced to the president of Korn Ferry, who said they were opening in Ireland and looking for senior partners. It was a no-brainer because it was all about people and performance, and a career in rugby had helped me with that."

PICS Getty Images, Peter Meagher & Wales Deaf Rugby

JOHN DOBSON

The Stormers head coach on South Africa's impact on the Champions Cup

"One day we will spoil the party and everyone will be better off for it"

Blue rinse
The Stormers tackle Clermont's Baptiste Jauneau

WE ARE in a huddle on a field at the edge of the Thames, feeling sorry for ourselves. It is raining, it is freezing, the Thames looks brown and bulging and we have just lost to Glasgow. This after a journey that went Cape Town to Johannesburg, Jo'burg to Doha, Doha to London, London to Glasgow. What victims. Oozing doubt.

And then superb skipper Steven Kitshoff asks – even by his standards – a pretty simple question.

"If anyone had told you a year ago that you could be playing for the Stormers and you would be in London preparing for a Heineken Cup game against London Irish, would you have come up this river by canoe without complaint?"

It changes everything. The truth is yes. Hell, we would have rowed up the West Coast of Africa avoiding the bandits of the Niger Delta and giving Mauritania a wide loop as we pushed for the Thames estuary. And we realise how privileged we are to be part of this competition.

Yes, the travel is tough and not optimal when you can only train once a week, but South African teams are not unique in this challenge. That, in fact, is where the skill lies. It's a different skill to what we are used to but it's still a skill.

Yes, there are times when one listens to people prattling on in podcasts (with quite lucid, if defensive, arguments) about how South Africans should not be in this competition. And you do feel a bit like the unwanted cousin at somebody's birthday party. That is just in the context of the competition, not the host clubs.

I do feel there is an opportunity here to enjoy some of the older values of rugby. If the competition is to be so diverse, there should maybe be a bit more effort from all of us to interact with each other, because I think that could make it very special. It's a bit sad to have such an international competition and after a game it's tracksuits on and on the bus to the antiseptic buffet in the hotel. But that's a tangent.

There are challenges that have to do with the inequity of the weather and the conditions. We see this in the URC. There can't be many competitions in the world where home and away see such a difference if you are playing a South African team. Playing the Lions in Johannesburg in January could be a scene from *Apocalypse Now*. Lions versus Bristol at Ashton Gate at the same time of year looks like a different code of rugby on a different-sized field.

We have proved we add value in the URC. As the Stormers get better known in Europe, we should see better attendances. There is no doubt rugby-wise it is a better product. It always is with South Africans in!

I know that's unbridled arrogance but it's because as a nation we are so competitive and physical that we really do challenge opposition teams, and that is the essence of rugby. We aren't going to win awards for tries from the end of the earth, but we are improving in this regard. We will make it a tougher competition and surely that is good for any competition?

Now, I am in agreement with some of those podding experts that we could tweak the format. I really don't want to throw a stone at organisers who have balanced a logistical elephant to get us in and do it right, but there is something romantic, practical and comprehensible around the old pools of four.

Even if it means one or two South African teams miss out to make it manageable, to get the right numbers, it's fine. It would make the competition more prestigious and that's what it feels like. Prestigious. Another level. We are very privileged and grateful to be part of it. I don't think this is the year any of us steal the silverware, but we are adding to it and one day we will spoil the party! And everyone will be better off for it.

Oh, and by the way, Cape Town isn't a bad trip, if the lure of Rome was what helped get Italy into the Six Nations!

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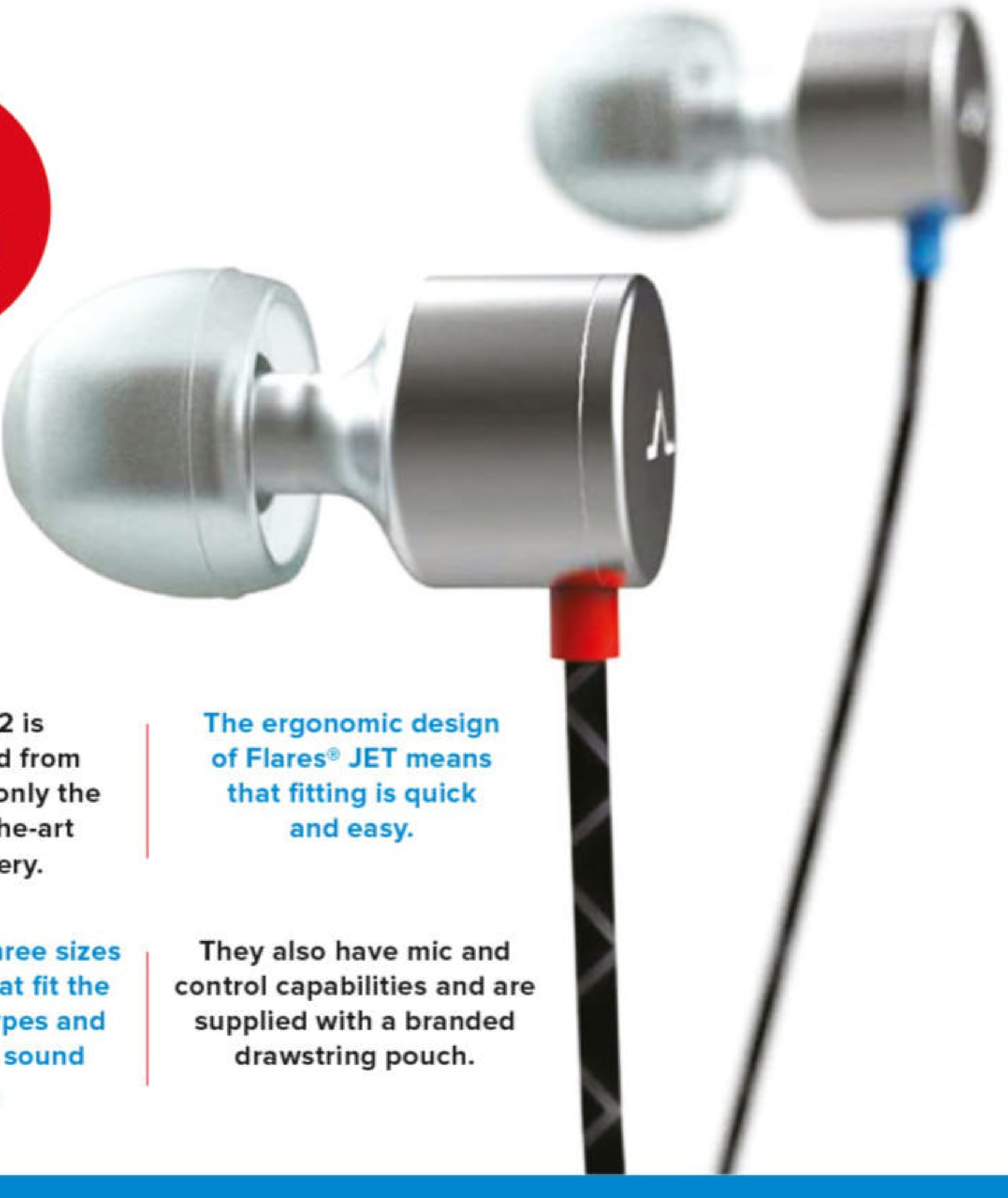

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Words ALAN DYMOCK / Main Picture SAM RILEY

FORWARD

He's a giant of English rugby but there was a time when we didn't know **Maro Itoje** had a big future. And while grateful for the help he's had to get here, there is a lot more on the horizon...

MILLING ON the edge of the huddle of Saracens figures is one fan, waiting for the right moment to cut in and interrupt. And with a natural break in the flow of conversation, they seize their chance. Sorry mate, they throw at the figure in front of them, could I possibly, you know, er, maybe grab a photo?

"You don't want a photo with me," says the Saracens, England and Lions legend, Richard Hill MBE. "You want one with him over there – he's the future!" Hill is grinning, pointing in the direction of young Maro Itoje, who's almost startled.

This is in the nascent days of Itoje's elite rugby career, and the scene plays out upstairs at the bar of the now StoneX Stadium during a sevens event. It's all very casual but even then, few fans are clamouring for Itoje's autograph. No one knew what lay ahead. Well, Hill did.

"I've had the fortune of knowing *SIR* Richard Hill for many, many years now," says England and Lions star Itoje, when he is reminded of that day. "I probably first met him when I was about 14. ➡

THINKING

➡ "He came into the academy on what would have been a Tuesday night. And admittedly, when I was that age, I wasn't too clued up on rugby. But I was aware that he was a Saracens first-team player and I was aware that he won the World Cup and he actually brought his World Cup winners' medal to show us. We were all like, 'Whoah, that's amazing!'

"But throughout my career, especially in the earlier years, he's been an incredible support to me. He is very personable. He has a heart of gold. And he's a very honourable man. If you ever tried to ask him to do something that was below the line, he would be like, 'Oh, uh, uh, oh... I can't do that!'

"But now that I'm a little bit older, it provides a bit of comfort knowing that he's there. I've got a good relationship with him. We can speak about numerous things. Rugby obviously, but also life outside. Difficult personal situations that he's been helpful with, or he's at least lent his ear to some of my woes."

Hill is the team manager with England now. As a player, the blindside was the pro everyone wanted to play with. Hard, without snarling. Unflappable, always. Incredibly skilled but still unflashy.

When Owen Farrell recently had a Seb Negri forearm in the throat, while playing against Italy, England head coach Steve Borthwick ran down to the touchliine. When asked about it later, he gave a line about just sauntering down to pick the brains of manager Hill. Because what an asset he is, Borthwick offered. Suuuuure. But considering how clearly angry Borthwick was at the time, a calm word from Hill could sate most.

Itoje, of course, knows his national boss well. Their playing careers overlapped a little at Sarries, and Borthwick was, you recall, an assistant to Eddie Jones on that run all the way up to the Rugby World Cup final in 2019.

So sticking to mentorship as a theme, what can Itoje tell us about Borthwick?

"I maybe packed down with him in training but never in a game," he begins. "His last year as a professional player was my first year in the Saracens system. So I was able to witness how he prepared. In the last year, he had a number of injuries, a number of things that would hold most men back, but he was incredibly diligent. That's the thing that probably stands out about Steve.

"It seemed as if nothing he did was by mistake. And that kind of energy has transferred to him as a coach."

Itoje wasn't ever scared of him, he makes clear, but he respects him. Particularly how he is not usually a hostage to emotion – Italy match aside. There's calculation. And he challenges Itoje, the lock tells us. But on what?

"Well, he's a second-row forward. He knows the ins and outs of the game. So whether it's my lineout calling, whether it's how I am amongst the boys, whether it's my play on the field, my energy or my contacts or whatever. He's always pushing and challenging me, which is exactly what I need."

Setting standards is something Itoje wants to do now, as an established star. On mentoring, specifically, the two-time Lions tourist tells *Rugby World* that he hopes he has wisdom to pass onto younger players, but it also cuts the other way. There's an energy that fresh, enthusiatic newcomers bring with them to camps or pro club environments. No matter who you are, you can feed off that. And after all, this is a very ambitious young man, still just 28.

So when asked if you have to be a magpie at the top of the game, picking up bits you can use from anywhere, from players of any age, he says: "You can be but it's very individual. However,

Commanding
In a Sarries lineout

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

EMOTIONAL SOUNDTRACK

"I have an element of nerves before every game I play. What I've found is that the nerves are a sign I'm slightly on edge and that's probably a good thing for me.

"I'm probably not the most sociable guy on game day. I probably won't be cracking jokes or laughing. I'll probably be what could be perceived as a little bit serious on the day.

"I use music as a way of tuning myself up or tuning myself down. It's dependent on how I feel. If I feel a little bit flat for whatever reason, then I'll use more aggressive, high-tempo music to try to get myself up. But if I'm in a good place and actually really need to calm down a bit, I'd change the music to try to reflect that.

"Against Scotland, for example, I was ready to go. I didn't need any more tuning up for that game. So on the bus to that game I listened to some gospel music. The tempo is still reasonably high but it's more calming than rap or hip-hop!"

Pulling in one direction An England driving maul

I think there's so much information out there that even with the absolute epitome of human perfection, as an athlete, so much information can get thrown at you. So you have to focus on what you think is important.

“Like, someone can critique my game from the weekend and be like, ‘Oh, you need to do this and you do that, you do that, you need to do that.’ You probably think of ten to 15 things I could improve on from last weekend. However, you can't focus on ten things, otherwise you are not going to improve on anything.”

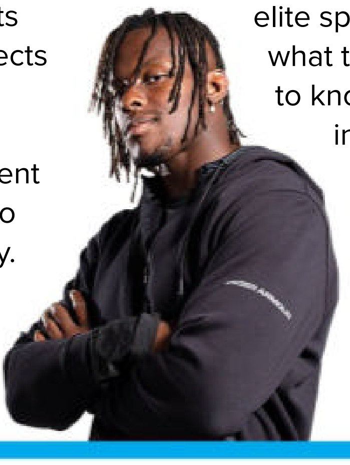
You have to be receptive, Itoje explains, but you need a decent filter.

You know the phrase, ‘I may not know art, but I know what I like’? Well, Itoje is very clear about what he likes. And he is happy to engage on the subjects too. It's what makes talking with him about where he's come from and who's helped along the way so interesting, because he's also a man in motion, and the direction of travel is forward.

With rugby, Itoje says, he is internally very honest about where his game is at right now. And as previously explained, he can laser in on the most important aspects. Off the pitch, he has a rotating cast of interests, and to an extent he can compartmentalise.

However, he adds: “I am of the opinion that the *other* aspects of my life help the other aspects of my life. So me having a passion for African art for example, that's the refreshment that I need as an individual so that I can fully focus on rugby. Or me having an interest in history or politics. That's the type of thing I enjoy.”

For the fans Itoje walks off at Twickenham



> “Having a passion for African art is the refreshment that I need to fully focus on rugby”

And it's on art that we focus, because it's a window into the future for one of rugby's modern characters. It's a line into where he wants to excel next.

“It will be humble compared to some, but I have a bit of an art collection. It's all in my house. The goal is to have an African art gallery. We've started baby steps but that is the ambition. To have an African art gallery in London and then build out from there.

FACT FILE

Age 28 (28 Oct 1994)
Born Camden, North London
Position Lock
Club Saracens
Height 6ft 5in
Weight 18st 2lb
England caps 65
Instagram handle @maroitoje

“It'd be great if we had international branches. But the goal is to be part of this new age of African art, spreading the good word as it were, celebrating and championing these African artists, giving them opportunities in the West as well as in Africa.”

So how does Itoje feel about institutions like the British Museum holding onto artifacts from other civilisations around the world?

“My view is reasonably simple on this,” the England star says. “If I've taken something that doesn't belong to me, without someone's will, then that's essentially theft, isn't it? So if I've taken something that's not mine, then the rightful thing will be to return it.

“I've had conversations with people in this world (about the need for action) and I think they all acknowledge that something needs to be done in this area. I think some steps are being done. But yeah, if you take something that doesn't belong to you, that's theft.”

There's no avoiding the opinion there, eh. And that element of Itoje's personality is what many who observe elite sport say they want – to know what the athletes stand for. Frankly, to know anything about them. Yet, in 2023 there's a dichotomy at play. Or at least it feels like it.

So while the Netflix cameras try to capture any candid moments behind the scenes of the Six Nations, they keep butting against the more conservative aspects of our sport. No one wants to reveal even a hint of their tactics or whisper on training approaches. It can be secretive.

According to Itoje, though, there is no great tension in his soul over this. As he says: “I don't see it as complicated as that. I think I'm reasonably open but I am also quite a private person as well.

“It's not that conflicted. I'm reasonably open about my interests, my pursuits, my ambitions outside the realms of rugby, as well as within rugby. But I don't spend my life on social media or showing everyone exactly what I'm doing at every moment in my life.”

Nor is this a world like in football or US sports where lipreaders are looking out for what players like Itoje say on the field. Mind you, off it, he'll tell you his views on most things anyway. We just wonder what art Richard Hill likes...

metapraxis
Financial Analytics
RHINO
metapraxis
metapraxis
Financial Analytics
9
12

Varsity bruise
Tackles go in during an Oxford-Cambridge match

STEPHEN JONES

Rugby's most outspoken and influential journalist

"What a pantomime the whole tackle height decision was"

The RFU edict on lowering the tackle height had the grass-roots and pro game alike spitting feathers. **Stephen Jones** assesses the debacle and the potential impact such a law would make

WHAT ON earth? That's my reaction on 19 January (and many others) when a news release from the RFU Council materialised. It said: "To support player welfare, the Council agreed on Monday 16 January to lower the height of the tackle across the community game from 1 July 2023."

It went on: "The RFU Council's unanimous vote will result in law variations from next season, 2023-24, with the tackle height being set at waist height or below. The changes will apply across England's community game (clubs, schools, colleges and universities) at both age-grade and adult levels – National One and below in the men's game and Championship One and below in the women's game."

There was a shock factor in all this that was nothing to do with tackling. How many in the sport knew that the RFU Council was still going? We'd not heard from them for years. And why were they suddenly the arbiters of law, good taste and safety? And why interfere in a key existing debate?

My immediate reaction was that, were I still playing and had to appear under the Council laws, I'd be investing in a cricket box, or "abdominal protector" as they used to call it in polite circles. If every time you got the ball you'd be smacked at the waist or below, then best take precautions.

But the reaction around the game was part amusement and part horror. Where was the

➡

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➡ evidence of the survey concluding that this move was needed? Where was the evidence that it would be a success and would make the game safer? How did anyone know if it'd wreck the whole game due to unintended consequences? Was it tried and tested? Nope.

The objections came in machine-gun bursts. The National One league is quality, it seemed a rarified arena in which to introduce something that would utterly change the shape of the game. What if players switched levels so that they crossed the Rubicon between low tackles and all the rest? Would tall players be excluded from the game? And where is the waist anyway? I suppose we all know where our belts are but referees would be examining a significant grey area over and over.

And how would tens of thousands of players and coaches find the time to adjust in the community game? These and other questions went ringing around the Shires. And soon enough, the professional game joined the resistance.

Next generation England U18

PICS Gallo Images & Getty Images

JANUARY 22 The opposition comes in thunderous bursts. Community clubs rage against the new measure, council representatives around the game are called in for consultation by their populace. A galaxy of top players express severe doubts. Every tackle would now be below the waist across England, but did being down there amongst the pumping knees and boots and studs make you safer?

JANUARY 23 At last, rugby is united... Against the tackle measure. Four days after the move was announced, Johnny Sexton says: "I don't agree with the RFU move and there is no point sitting on the fence, is there? You have got tall people who play the game, it should be their decision on how to tackle."

World Rugby CEO Alan Gilpin, on a quick healing mission, confirms that World Rugby would be considering changes to the tackle law at all levels in the future. However, he also points out that the tackle height would not be lowered as far as the waist at elite level but come down below the shoulders. No formal law changes would ever be made without rigorous trials and analysis.

Any change to the legal tackle height at the top end of the sport wouldn't come in earlier than 2024-25 and may not be in place until after the 2027 World Cup.

So by now, several days after the announcement, the affair was becoming an Aunt Sally for the whole community. Twickenham started scrambling. Around 250 RFU clubs – an incredible number – supported a special general meeting. The Community Clubs' Union was introduced, specifically in response to the changes, and led the campaign.

The buck was passed smoothly down the line at Twickenham. The Council, Board, the media department, the chief executive, all of them maintained the smoothest transition of the blame.

JANUARY 27 The RFU apologise for causing "anger and concern" with the announcement. "In our design to act quickly to reduce head impacts and concussions in the community game, which represents 99% of the rugby-playing population in England, we have upset many of you who are champions, volunteers and ambassadors of our game."

Observers note this release was more gracious and timely than the original. "We fully acknowledge we got the engagement wrong and are truly sorry."

JANUARY 28 Alan Gilpin goes further. He says it is not inevitable at all that the legal tackle height will be lowered at professional or any level, though unions do have the right to make changes within reason for their community games.

Gilpin was even asked to comment on the cause for the RFU Board to resign – this was also news because the RFU Board has been every bit as anonymous in the game at large as the Council. "These situations are always concerning. You'd like to think that the right level of dialogue now between the community

Hands free Sale offload at Exeter. Would lowering tackle heights create more space to move the ball?

game and the RFU would allow common sense to prevail." You sure would.

FEBRUARY 3 The Welsh Rugby Union enter the arena. The WRU, in arguably its most dismal and defensive phase in its history, confirm that it is considering changing tackling in the community game from next season. John Manders, who is on the union's Community Game Board, says: "We will be creating a 'task and finish' group to look at the issue of tackle height." Nothing like referring it to yet another committee – the staple of rugby history.

Fair enough, although there are hints in the statement that the WRU are going down the same track as that explored with total lack of success by the RFU.

FEBRUARY 14 Scottish Rugby decide to join the potential Aunt Sallys. They make an announcement. People in the media trying to unravel the affairs of the notoriously secretive SRU are enamoured of the fact that at least they have said something about something.

However, the SRU plan to conduct "a wide-ranging consultation process" with players, coaches and referees on the issue of lowering tackle height in the community game. That's their 100th 'wide-ranging consultation process'.

Drilling technique
England training

FEBRUARY 16 On the day I write, a total of 78,800 people have signed a petition to stop the tackle change in England. Note that none of them had signed a petition to increase the dangers of rugby. There are some people who, in desperation to campaign for the game to be safer, pick up on matters which are neither here nor there for safety. But not this way, not with wild guesswork. What a pantomime it all was.

FRANKLY, IF there is one lesson to be learned from all this, it is that the only way to be sure in changing the face of the game is to know it definitely works and definitely makes the game safer. The sport has been hurt beyond measure for decades by law-formers having brainwaves, and finding when their precious new ideas were put into practice that the game was hampered in some way or actually their area of concern had become even bigger.

Sometimes there are advantages to having been in rugby since the early days. I can even spot the utter disaster foisted on the game by the then-IRB laws committee in the mid-1990s, led by Dr Roger Vanderfield, an Australian.

The laws change stated that from then on, any ball trapped in rucks or mauls or pile-ups would result in a scrum put-in for the team which had not taken it in. "Use it or lose it."

It tore up rugby's central principle: go forward. Rugby has never recovered.

What happened? Forwards were no longer needed close in to drive rucks and mauls forward. So what happened next? They strung out in two lines across the field, bashed the ball up endlessly and serious head injuries quickly became inevitable. That brings us right up to where we are now.

While all the debate about the recent RFU Council move was happening, of course, it was funny because it was so dire. But we were still mourning those lost, still supporting Steve Thompson, Ryan Jones, Alix Popham and the others afflicted by serious issues – still fretting about interpretations around contact and at the breakdown.

We are in other areas still waiting for proof of the causal chain between certain types of contact and certain injuries. It is a horrible period. And as I have written before, the frantic witch-hunt which occurs whenever anything of remote severity is inflicted by one player or another does no one any good – especially as the ranters and ravers, as they always do, only roar for an opponent to be excluded from a game if it is an opponent, not their own shining lights.

If it was possible to hurry along every scrap of research so that we knew precisely which actions caused which illnesses and which measures were simply a waste of time, we could sleep easier in our beds. Clearly, it is vitally important to err on the side of caution until we know for sure but also there is the chance that games have been ruined by red cards for nothing.

Yet some bodies which pretend that they have player welfare solely at their heart, when there are elements of grandstanding and self-justification about their announced measures, are sowing further confusion.

The sport must hold its nerve, wait for the incontrovertible evidence, be over-cautious rather than cavalier, and cop it if any injustice is perpetrated under the banner of safety.

Tackling below the waist? Maybe we will learn in time that it would be a brilliant solution. More likely, all it would do for the sport is cake faces in mud.

> "The sport must hold its nerve, wait for the incontrovertible evidence, be over-cautious rather than cavalier"

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Words **Elise Hamersley & Josh Graham** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

WOMEN'S 6N 2023

TEAM GUIDE

The TikTok Women's Six Nations kicks off on 25 March and runs until 29 April. Here's the lowdown on all the countries involved

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Battle Scarrs Centre Emily Scarratt begins the new England era

ENGLAND

YOU ARE only as good as your last game, as the old adage goes. So despite going for a fifth Six Nations title in a row, the Red Roses will still feel they very much have something to prove after the crushing disappointment of losing the World Cup final to New Zealand, which brought to an end their record-breaking run of 30 consecutive Test-match wins.

Simon Middleton's side now has a long-term focus on the home World Cup in 2025 but must first reassert their Six Nations dominance. France, once again, are the most likely stumbling block.

Rebuild Players console each other after the final

FORM GUIDE

This Six Nations will mark a changing of the guard for England, at least in the coaching department with head coach Middleton and attack/backs coach Scott Bemand departing after the campaign.

It is a freak of the Red Roses' supremacy that Middleton will ultimately be regarded as a failure in the top job because of the two World Cup final losses he presided over. The squad will be eager to get going again after the agonising nature of the most recent, that 34-31 defeat to the Black Ferns.

Their previous 30 opponents had been swept aside and England's players will want to restore that aura of invincibility and still need to impress forwards coach Louis Deacon, who will remain in place ahead of 2025.

KEY PLAYER

An ever-present for the best part of 15 years, centre Emily Scarratt is still the heartbeat of this England side. Scarratt's ball-playing has even seen her star at fly-half for her Premier 15s side Loughborough Lightning.

Holly Aitchison, Tatyana Heard and Helena Rowland all played inside her at the World Cup, with Scarratt's solidity key amid changing centre combinations.

VITAL STATISTIC

The Red Roses' 30-Test winning streak may have ended at the worst possible time in the World Cup final but it will still be 1,841 days since they last lost in the Six Nations (France, 2018) when they play Scotland

ONE TO WATCH

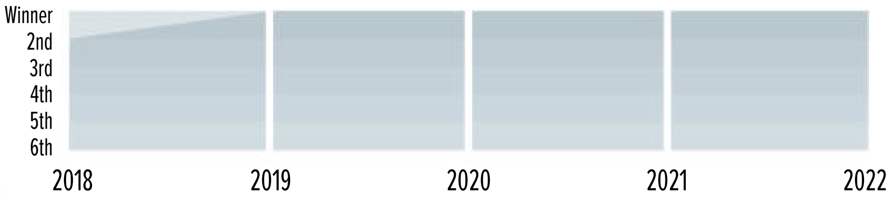
Loughborough Lightning duo Cath O'Donnell and Sadia Kabeya both made the bench for the World Cup final and will be keen to push on. Flanker Kabeya got the nod for the tournament in New Zealand ahead of the likes of Sarah Beckett and Vicky Fleetwood and proved her worth with a Player of the Match performance against Fiji.

However, given Abbie Ward's pregnancy announcement, O'Donnell might have a better chance of nailing down a starting spot in the second row alongside the superb Zoe Aldcroft.

PREDICTION

England ought to brush aside their first four opponents and the Twickenham crowd should cheer them past France.

SIX NATIONS FINISHES



ENGLAND'S SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sat 25 Mar	**Scotland**	4.45pm, Kingston Park
Sun 2 Apr	**Italy**	3pm, Franklin's Gardens
Sat 15 Apr	**Wales**	2.15pm, Cardiff Arms Park
Sat 22 Apr	**Ireland**	2.15pm, Musgrave Park
Sat 29 Apr	**France**	1pm, Twickenham

Carry on Madoussou Fall takes on Italy

FRANCE

LES BLEUES have sat begrudgingly in England's shadow for the last four years. They remain the only significant challenger to the Red Roses in this arena, consistently beating all other nations, but have struggled to pull the trigger against their old foes when it really matters most.

France have not lifted the trophy since 2018, taking second the last three years. New joint head coaches Gaëlle Mignot and David Ortiz will be gunning to capitalise on any English hesitation with the wounds still fresh from their World Cup final heartbreak in New Zealand.

Twins for the win Marine and Romane Ménager

FORM GUIDE

France finished 2022 with an admirable third place in the World Cup, losing only to England in the pool (13-7) before agonisingly going down 25-24 to New Zealand in a semi-final thriller.

Their defence has matured beautifully and came into its own against England when they put in a lung-busting 127 tackles. *Les Bleues* showed their fight is still there too against the Black Ferns – a first-ever Rugby World Cup final just slipping from their grasp when Caroline Drouin missed a last-minute penalty.

If they are to win this championship, France need to recover from that and cut out any errors when they face England in the inaugural women's stand-alone game at Twickenham.

KEY PLAYER

The formidable Gabrielle Vernier will once again team up with centre partner Maëlle Filopon to form a threatening duo this year. Vernier put in some huge hits for France in the World Cup and will be key to keeping opponents guessing.

Her attacking work-rate is astounding, the centre consistently sets up her back three and regularly crosses herself too.

Prominent players Laure Sansus, Safi N'Diaye, Marjorie Mayans and Céline Ferer all called time on their careers after the World Cup but France have handed out 32 professional contracts until 2024 for the next generation.

ONE TO WATCH

Romane Ménager was taken off with concussion in France's second game of the World Cup against England, but she returned to score against New Zealand. A powerful ball-carrier whose twin sister Marine also plays for France, Ménager is a versatile back-row forward who wins collisions and is dogged in defence.

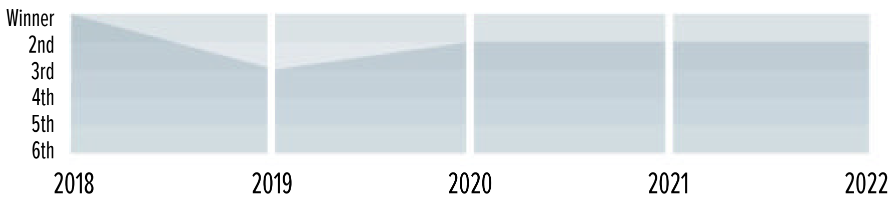
PREDICTION

Realistically, it's all down to Twickenham. The French love affair with second place is likely to continue with England the only side able to overturn them.

VITAL STATISTIC

France have lost by an average of 9.25 points to England over the past four years. That period includes a 24-12 home defeat in last year's Grand Slam decider in Bayonne

SIX NATIONS FINISHES



FRANCE'S SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sun 26 Mar	**Italy**	3pm, Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi
Sat 1 Apr	**Ireland**	3.15pm, Musgrave Park
Sun 16 Apr	**Scotland**	3.15pm, Stade de la Rabine
Sun 23 Apr	**Wales**	3.15pm, Stade des Alpes
Sat 29 Apr	**England**	1pm, Twickenham

In good Nich
Nichola Fryday was magnificent in Japan

IRELAND

IRELAND ARE another nation who have experienced a rollercoaster year since they finished fourth in the last Six Nations. Defeat to Scotland in 2021 scuppered the side's World Cup qualification chances, making them the only nation in this year's tournament not to have competed in New Zealand.

Ireland regathered for their summer tour of Japan, and the IRFU pledged to invest €1m per annum into the women's game after a lengthy review. Recent poor form aside, they are the third-most successful Six Nations side having won two titles including the 2013 Grand Slam.

Result Celebrating the win over Scotland last year

FORM GUIDE

Ireland may have been dominated by England and France in the 2022 Six Nations, but they secured a convincing win over Italy to go with a marginal victory over Scotland.

They haven't played since their drawn series in Japan last August, so will be something of an unknown quantity this tournament. Expect several new faces, many newly capped in the Far East.

Despite missing the World Cup, Ireland are above Wales and Scotland in the world rankings, in eighth. As hooker Neve Jones tells us (P48-49), they're determined to become world class.

KEY PLAYER

Talismanic skipper Nichola Fryday will play a key role this year. Her leadership qualities are undeniable and the lock is not short on talent as an individual either. Fryday's form in the Premier 15s for Exeter Chiefs has been excellent and her barrelling runs are an indispensable feature of Ireland's game. She turned down a contract with Ireland last year, opting to remain semi-pro in England, and will be hoping to reap the rewards of being exposed to a higher standard of rugby.

VITAL STATISTIC

This year marks the 30th anniversary of Ireland's first-ever women's Test match. They played Scotland in 1993 at Raeburn Place in Edinburgh, the hosts running out 10-0 winners

ONE TO WATCH

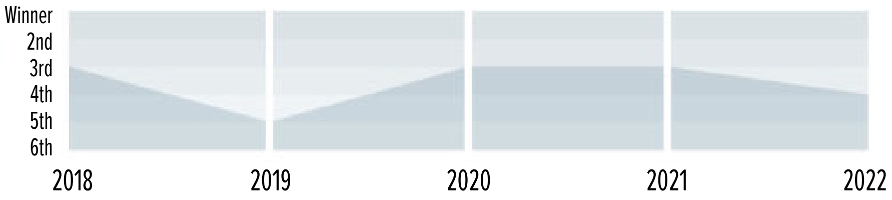
Some 15 players made their Test debut in green during 2022, six of them on the summer tour. They include Natasja Behan, who looks potent on the wing.

Grace Moore has been electric for Saracens this season. She was previously contracted to the Irish Sevens programme in 2020 and it shows – the flanker is quick, powerful and always makes an impact in attack. Moore has only picked up five caps since her debut two years ago and we are yet to see her in full stride.

PREDICTION

The only side not to have had their credentials tested on the world stage, Ireland will challenge Italy, Scotland and Wales but are at risk of being blown out of the water by France and England.

SIX NATIONS FINISHES



IRELAND'S SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sat 25 Mar	**Wales**	2.15pm, Cardiff Arms Park
Sat 1 Apr	**France**	3.15pm, Musgrave Park
Sat 15 Apr	**Italy**	4.45pm, Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi
Sat 22 Apr	**England**	2.15pm, Musgrave Park
Sat 29 Apr	**Scotland**	7.30pm, DAM Health Stadium

Outflanked Giada Franco impressed at the World Cup in New Zealand

ITALY

IT REALLY is the beginning of a new era for Italy after Andrea Di Giandomenico stepped down as head coach following the World Cup after 13 years.

He led the *Azzurre* to the quarter-finals in New Zealand, their best-ever result, but Six Nations rivals France proved too strong. Giovanni Raineri is the new man in charge and hopes are high, with Italy sitting fifth in the world rankings.

Covid had a big part to play in Italy's disappointing fifth-place finish in the 2022 championship, with several key players and Di Giandomenico missing at different stages. That helped explain why they went down 29-8 to an Ireland side they were widely expected to beat.

Ahead of this year's competition, the FIR has handed out 22 centralised contracts in a bid to try to sustain the side's recent progress.

Mouthful Fly-half Veronica Madia uses her fend

FORM GUIDE

Italy began the World Cup by defeating USA 22-10 but they fared less well against fellow North American outfit Canada in their second hit-out, going down 22-12 to the eventual fourth-place finishers. Flanker Giada Franco's Player of the Match display helped Italy see off Japan 21-8 in a final pool game that included tries by Maria Magatti and Melissa Bettoni.

A Joanna Grisez hat-trick and yellow cards for Magatti and prop Silvia Turani put paid to Italy's semi-final hopes as France won their quarter-final 39-3, with only Michela Sillari's penalty to show for Italy's valiant efforts.

VITAL STATISTIC

Despite exiting at the quarter-final stage of the World Cup, Italy were still one of the best sides to watch in New Zealand. They were fifth for both offloads (39) and clean breaks (24) in the tournament's overall standings

KEY PLAYER

There's no getting away from the fact that the experienced duo of full-back/captain Manuela Furlan and scrum-half Sara Barattin will be incredibly hard to replace after their retirements.

But if anyone can take on the mantle of being the side's key player, it's centre Beatrice Rigoni. She made her debut aged 18 in 2014 and brought up her 50th cap last year before being named in the Team of the Championship.

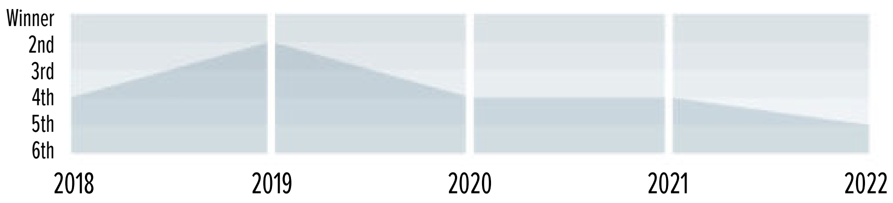
ONE TO WATCH

Winger Aura Muzzo hit the ground running at the World Cup with two tries in Italy's opening win over USA. She carried that scoring form into the 22-5 friendly win over Spain in February and is sure to be a constant threat. Muzzo made six clean breaks at the World Cup, the fourth-highest total, and added five offloads to her impressive stats.

PREDICTION

Italy will have to be patient with the big two up first but we expect them to better last year's fifth-place finish.

SIX NATIONS FINISHES



ITALY'S SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sun 26 Mar	**France**	3pm, Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi
Sun 2 Apr	**England**	3pm, Franklin's Gardens
Sat 15 Apr	**Ireland**	4.45pm, Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi
Sat 22 Apr	**Scotland**	4.45pm, Dam Health Stadium
Sat 29 Apr	**Wales**	3.30pm, Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi

On the run Rhona Lloyd tests Australia's defence

SCOTLAND

THE HIGHS and lows for Scotland have been intense since their last TikTok Six Nations outing. Bryan Easson is preparing for his third championship in charge of a side who will be desperate to better their sixth-place finish from 2022.

However, it does mean they can only go up this time around and they enter the tournament buoyed by the SRU's December announcement that saw 28 players given professional contracts for the first time. Confidence building and momentum will be key for Scotland but they start with an imposing fixture against a wounded England who will be keen to restart their winning streak after losing the World Cup final in November.

Sky-high Helen Nelson claims the ball in the air

FORM GUIDE

The Scots qualified for the Rugby World Cup at the start of last year, ending a 12-year wait, but soon headed home after finishing bottom of Pool A. It was one heartbreak after another for the squad who crashed out after being thrashed 57-0 by eventual champions New Zealand.

Their slim defeats to Wales (18-15) and Australia (14-12) gave a glimpse of Scotland's potential. Against Australia in particular, their fiery pack roared to life in the set-piece but the side now sits on nine straight defeats.

KEY PLAYER

Scotland will be without Harlequins powerhouse Jade Konkel-Roberts in the back row after the firefighter went under the knife, but the return of wing Rhona Lloyd from injury is a welcome sight.

Stalwart Lana Skeldon will be an essential component as they look to dominate up front. The Worcester hooker has more than half a century of caps for her nation and crossed the whitewash in the World Cup fixtures against Wales and Australia. Her composure and game management are key strengths for the set-piece specialist who regularly scores from the maul.

ONE TO WATCH

Caity Mattinson continues to impress after switching allegiance from England. Don't let her short stature fool you – the scrum-half is deceptively strong. The accuracy of her kicking is next-level and the Worcester player's speed at the breakdown can unleash the back-line.

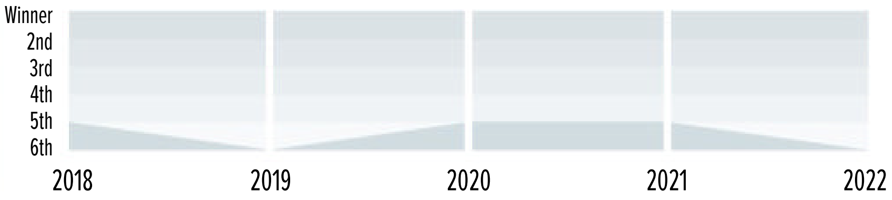
PREDICTION

Scotland will have trouble with England and France. But with Wales, Italy and Ireland all visiting Edinburgh, Scotland could finish as high as third. Round two against Wales will set the tone.

VITAL STATISTIC

Lana Skeldon has won 57 caps since making her debut as a teenager in 2011. The hooker has started 53 games, which equates to 93% of her appearances. A mainstay and automatic starter

SIX NATIONS FINISHES



SCOTLAND'S SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sat 25 Mar	**England**	4.45pm, Kingston Park
Sat 1 Apr	**Wales**	5.30pm, DAM Health Stadium
Sun 16 Apr	**France**	3.15pm, Stade de la Rabine
Sat 22 Apr	**Italy**	4.45pm, DAM Health Stadium
Sat 29 Apr	**Ireland**	7.30pm, DAM Health Stadium

Fired up Gwen Crabb celebrates a try at the World Cup

WALES

WALES HAD a successful time of it in 2022 after making the World Cup quarter-finals and recording their best Six Nations finish for 13 years.

Wins over Scotland and Ireland were enough to give them third place in the championship on points difference. However, this time around Ioan Cunningham's side will be without their iconic former captain Siwan Lillicrap, who was often central to their fortunes, after the Gloucester-Hartpury No 8 retired from international duty at the age of 35 following the World Cup.

Back to Black Wales lost twice to New Zealand

The national side have benefited from a year of landmark professional contracts and there is still plenty of youth and experience within this team to keep optimism high for 2023.

FORM GUIDE

Wales had a tough draw in the World Cup but emerged with plenty of credit. They edged Scotland 18-15, before losing to eventual champions New Zealand 56-12 and Australia 13-7. After advancing to the quarters as one of the two best third-place finishers, they were knocked out by the Black Ferns.

Errors tend to creep in under pressure with this Welsh team but they often get the better of set-piece exchanges against less powerful sides. However, Alisha Butchers's knee injury against Scotland in the autumn will keep the 2022 Players' Player of the Championship out of action this time around in a major blow to the team.

VITAL STATISTIC

Wales back-row Georgia Evans has been tremendous for her club side Saracens. Evans has more defensive breakdown arrivals than any other Allianz Premier 15s player, with an average of 11.3 per game this season

KEY PLAYER

It will be a different Six Nations without the sight of Jasmine Joyce tearing into space after the Bristol flyer went back to join the GB Sevens squad full-time.

But the game management and boot of Elinor Snowsill frequently carries Wales through turmoil. The vastly experienced Bristol fly-half has competed in four World Cups now and will be a vital part of their kicking and attacking game in this tournament.

ONE TO WATCH

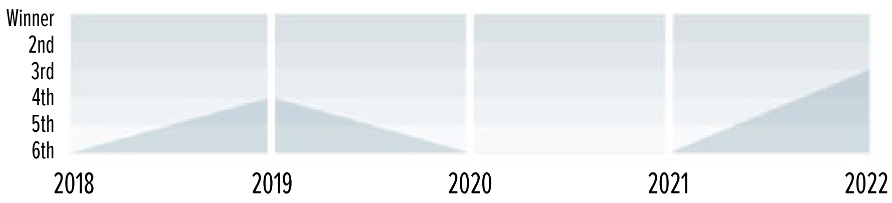
Sisilia Tuipulotu has rugby royalty in her blood – the 19-year-old is the cousin of Scarlets' Carwyn Tuipulotu and her father Sione has 29 caps for Tonga.

But the Gloucester-Hartpury player has stepped out of their shadow, and her conversion from second-row to tighthead prop has suited her strengths.

PREDICTION

Wales have momentum and are capable of another third-place finish if they front up against Scotland, Italy and Ireland.

SIX NATIONS FINISHES



WALES' SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sat 25 Mar	**Ireland**	2.15pm, Cardiff Arms Park
Sat 1 Apr	**Scotland**	5.30pm, DAM Health Stadium
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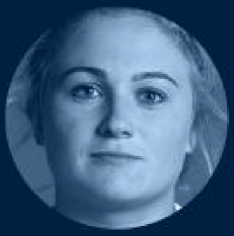


Age 24 (26 Dec 1998)
Born Antrim, N Ireland
Position Hooker
Club Gloucester-Hartpury
Height 5ft 2in
Weight 11st 5lb
Ireland caps 13 (5T)
Instagram handle @neve_jones_

Words **Alan Pearey** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

NEVE JONES

The Gloucester and Ireland hooker sees gold at the end of the rainbow

EVERYONE LOVES a fighter and in Neve Jones, 5ft 2in and 72kg soaking wet, Ireland have a 24-carat gem. An enduring memory from last year's TikTok Six Nations is of the Antrim-born hooker getting involved in some goal-line argy-bargy against England.

"I'm not sure what happened, it may have been an arm flailing, but I thought 'I'm not going to take that!'" says Jones, 24, when we ask her about the incident. "For anyone I play with, I've got their back and if I see someone getting something they don't deserve I'm going to stick up for them. A little feistiness never hurt anybody."

England won 69-0 that day at Welford Road but Jones typified the pluck of the Irish. "It was 10-0 at half-time and that's huge for us. And I think it was a bit of a shock to England. Normally they get a good few tries by half-time and bring on their bench to get a few more. But mindset-wise, we held them out for 40, 50, 55 minutes and we had a card at some point, so playing 14 v 15 is tough."

Roar emotion
Jones scores v Italy in last year's Six Nations

Rewind a few years and we find another example of her refusal to lie down. Her English dad played rugby league to a decent level and Neve took to union "like a fish to water" after experiencing it aged six at Ballymena RFC. In primary school she played with the boys but that had to stop when she reached U12s. The problem was that girls' rugby wasn't available at her secondary school, Cambridge House Grammar.

"So I tried to set up rugby, with not much luck. I moved secondary school (Ballymena Academy) for my A Levels and tried again, and still no luck. I tried relentlessly.

"We had options for games and one was walking. Everyone was like, 'I'm sure walking is not as much fun as it's made out to be'. I asked if they fancied playing rugby and I had 25 girls keen to play, some tag, some contact. I was in the principal's office every other day, 'I've got 20 girls, 30 girls', but no luck. They said hockey was their main priority."

There was no girls' rugby at the time in Ballymena, so, from the age of 14, Jones made regular trips to Belfast to train and play for Malone RFC. Later, at Ballymena Academy, S&C coach Ryan Keating let her do weights with the boys, giving her a foundation that continues to serve her well.

She led Ulster to their first U18 provincial title and her Ireland debut came in 2020 against Italy. She was still on the periphery at the ill-fated World Cup qualifying tournament in Parma in 2021, playing 15 minutes against Spain but not featuring thereafter as Ireland bowed out after a cruel defeat by Scotland. "When that final whistle went, we were upset, shocked, angry. We went through all the emotions. As a team we just had to stay tight and deal with it.

"It was gutting not to be at the World Cup but I still watched it. I'm passionate about the game growing whether I'm playing or not. And I think there were silver linings to it because it kickstarted the changes we needed."

Last year saw the IRFU launch a full-time high-performance programme. The new contracts range from €15,000 to €30,000 a season, with bonuses on top, and in time all the elite women players, like the men, are likely to be based in Ireland. "People are working very hard on the contracts and are passionate about making things better off the field for the benefit of the team and for Ireland. We can see a bit of gold at the end of the rainbow."

For now, Jones makes a living as a nanny and playing for a Gloucester-Hartpury team that is flying in the Allianz Premier 15s.

"I've only been in the squad for the last year but I know there's a lot of girls who are the heart of Gloucester-Hartpury. The likes of Kathryn Buggy, Sophie Tandy, Rachel Lund have been in it for the last six years or so and they built this culture and environment that's been growing nicely. We get on so well on and off the field."

Ireland were fourth in last year's Six Nations but the new coaching team, under Greg McWilliams, has now had time to bed in. That includes a drawn series in Japan last August when Jones scored a hat-trick of maul tries. She picked up the Rugby Writers of Ireland Women's Player of the Year award at a ceremony in Dublin.

"We hope to build on what we've done over the last 12 to 18 months, enjoy our rugby and grow as a squad," she says of the Six Nations.

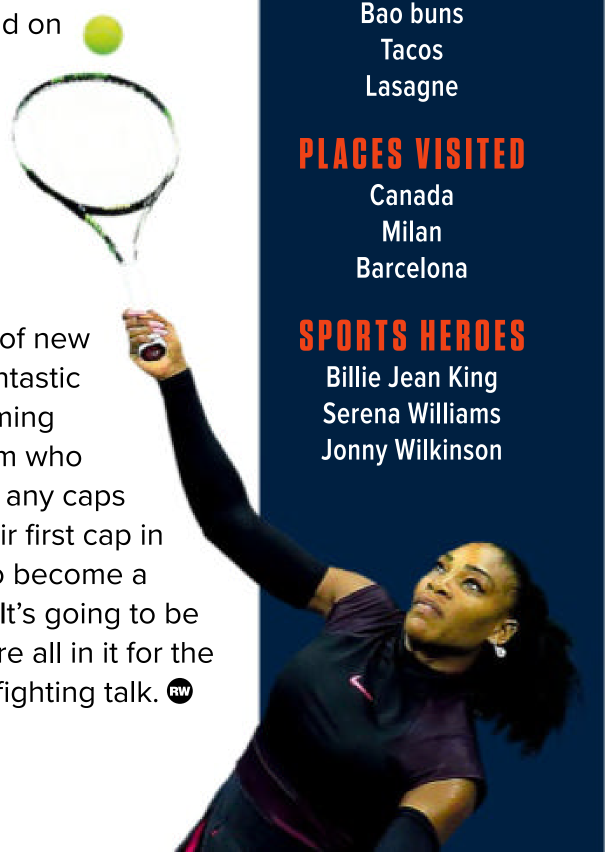
"We've got a lot of new girls coming in, fantastic young players coming through the system who may not have had any caps yet or just had their first cap in Japan. We want to become a world-class team. It's going to be a journey and we're all in it for the long haul." That's fighting talk. RW

MY TOP 3S

FOODS
Bao buns
Tacos
Lasagne

PLACES VISITED
Canada
Milan
Barcelona

SPORTS HEROES
Billie Jean King
Serena Williams
Jonny Wilkinson



THE MAKING OF CAELAN DORIS

WORDS **TOM ENGLISH** // MAIN PIC **BRENDAN MORAN/SPORTSFILE/GETTY IMAGES**

He's the form No 8 in world rugby right now, but how did he get here? We uncover the steps that brought us to Doris's day

CAELAN DORIS was wowing people in Ireland long before his gobsmacking performance against France in the Six Nations. But the relentless power of what he delivered against the French, the ball-carrying, offloading majesty of it, shot him up the pecking order on the list of the world's great players.

His story is a little different. From the village of Lacken on the north Mayo coast, he went to a primary school of 35 kids and was in a class with just one other child. Parents Rachel and Chris are psychotherapists. Chris is also an artist. Brother Rian lives in LA and owns a $20m company operating in the field of neuroscience that has Deloitte, Goldman Sachs and the US Navy as clients. They're interesting people.

Everybody you talk to about the Ireland No 8

➡

CAP 18
NEW ZEALAND
2-7-2022

Breaking loose
Doris escapes Toulouse

➡ will tell you about his intelligence and how normal he is in his increasingly abnormal world. He suffered a brief, but concerning, concussion injury and has spoken bravely about it. That could have ended his career. He talks of the importance of mindfulness in a way that makes him a compelling voice.

He didn't exactly gallop into the minis section at Ballina RFC, but once he was there the magic started. From Lacken to Blackrock to Leinster to Ireland, this is an ongoing story of excellence. At 24, there's so much left to see.

THE BALLINA BOY

Luke Sweeney was on the same minis rugby team as Doris at Ballina and has played Gaelic Football against him

"We played together from around U10s, him from Lacken and me 15 minutes down the road in Ballina. He was with us for a few years and then he went to boarding school at Blackrock and we really only saw him in the summer when he'd come and play a bit of Gaelic Football. And I'm telling you, he wasn't a lad you wanted to mark because he was bigger than most of us.

"What was lovely – and this is a memory I'll cherish – Blackrock were knocked out of the Leinster Senior Cup early one year, so he came back to Ballina and he played in the Connacht U17 Plate competition. In the quarter-final he played second-centre, number 13, and he scored four tries. It was unreal. Then he played No 8 in the semi-final and final and we won the thing. We had a big party in a shed back at our family farm and Caelan was there. Great craic. We knew he was somebody who was going to be very good.

"There's a huge sense of pride around the club, everybody is buzzing for him, his debut jersey is hanging on the wall. You can imagine the young kids in the grass roots of the club looking at him and knowing that he is one of them. The great hope is that when he's finished at the very top level, he might come back and play a game or two for us. That would be some laugh, wouldn't it?"

THE SCHOOL PAL

Conor Dean, son of former Ireland fly-half Paul, was one of Doris's best mates at Blackrock College

"It's weird talking about him because to me he's a friend first rather than a rugby player. I'll pick up a newspaper and see a big piece talking about how he's one of the best players in the world and I'm kinda reminded he's a bit special.

"We started a sports leisurewear company together last summer called EXCD Clothing and it's great to be involved in that with him. He's a lot of brains for the operation. He's not changed at all. He's exactly the same person, very normal, very humble.

"Honestly, if you were in his company and you didn't know who he was then you wouldn't know he was a rugby player. He's very good at winding down and being a normal friend rather than a big-name player. Sometimes I even forget that he plays rugby. He's getting great coverage for the phenomenal things he's doing with Leinster and Ireland, but there's precisely zero chance of any of this going to his head. He's just not like that."

THE EARLY COACH

When he played Irish Schools and then U20s, Noel McNamara was his coach

"I've known about Caelan for a long time. I coached Clongowes in the Leinster Schools Cup and we made the final in 2014, where we met a Blackrock team that had Nick Timoney (Ulster), Conor Oliver (Connacht), Joey Carbery,

> "He's very good at winding down and being a normal friend rather than a big-name rugby player"

Jeremy Loughman (both Munster) and Hugo Keenan (Leinster)… and Caelan.

"The incredible thing was at the beginning of that year Caelan was only 15. He was 16 by the time the final came around, which is still very young. He had two more years at school after that. Anyway, in that illustrious company, he stood out. Blackrock won and he was probably the biggest influence that day.

"Even then you could see he was a bit different. Unique. I started coaching him a while after that. He captained Leinster Schools and was our No 8 and best player. We got an injury to a second-row ahead of the deciding game against Ulster and I asked Caelan what should we do. He said, 'I'll play second-row'. No hesitation. He just took ownership of it. Then he scored two tries and was our best player in that game.

"He captained Ireland U18s and we played England in Bristol. Their back row was Ben Earl, Tom Curry and Ben Curry and they had Nick Isiekwe in the second row. We lost by two points but Caelan was unbelievable. Physically he was developed from a very young age, so he could compete against bigger and older lads. He's gone on to become a generational talent.

"He's very bright and has a fantastic temperament for top-level sport, or top-level anything. He doesn't get fazed, has an immense work-rate and has no obvious weakness. Early on, people would say that the only thing that could be better was his lineout jumping but there was a reason for that. From an early age he stood out of every lineout because he was the best ball-carrier in every team he played for. You wouldn't put him in the lineout, why would you?

"For every 100 things he does, 90 are absolutely outstanding and in some – France in the Six Nations – all 100 are world class."

LEINSTER EFFECT

In 2016, Trevor Hogan was involved with Leinster's sub academy when Doris joined

"The first thing I noticed about Caelan was his ability to play beyond his years. One, two, three, four-year gap, it didn't seem to matter. He has that temperament to mix with older people. Even how he carries himself. Mature, considerate, like an experienced adult. He gives that vibe. Credit to his parents.

"He's very reserved and wouldn't waste words, but as he gets older he'll grow into a leadership role with Leinster and Ireland and he'll find another level when he does. He won't force it. He'll do it in his own good time and do it brilliantly.

"Back in the day, when I was playing, leadership was a lot to do with emotion and then when I was coming to the end of my playing days things were getting more analytical and it was becoming more about detail and mentality. Caelan will be outstanding at that when he joins the senior players' group. They'll be hanging on his every word.

"I'm not sure he looks too far forward. The World Cup, the Lions. The way he's going, anything is possible. You have to remember that not everything has been plain sailing for him. He's had upsets. A bad concussion on his Ireland debut, a hamstring, a shoulder. He's had lots of knocks and has missed a fair few months, but he comes back stronger every time."

Braced for impact
Carrying in 2017

FACT FILE

Age 24 (2 Apr 1998)
Born Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland
Position No 8
Province Leinster
Height 6ft 4in
Weight 16st 9lb
Ireland caps 26
Debut Scotland, 2020
Instagram handle @caelandoris

THE AGENT

Former London Irish and Ireland winger Niall Woods manages Doris

"With Caelan, emotional intelligence is through the roof. He went to Blackrock as a boarder in his first year, which is unusual. Not that many board from 13, so he's always had to fend for himself to a degree. Young lad in from the country. He's mature beyond his years. You would forget that he's only 24.

"He played a lot of rugby. A Senior Cup player in fourth, fifth and sixth year. Plenty before him have done that but many of them would have had enough of it by the time they left school. That's a lot of rugby. Caelan's always had the desire to go on. I remember talking to Jamie Heaslip (former Ireland and Lions No 8) a few years ago and he said, 'This fella is going to be so much better than I ever was. His ceiling is sky-high'.

"That was lovely to hear about a client. Caelan just wants to keep to himself. To maximise his opportunities off the field, you have to be in the media and be on social media and growing your follower numbers, so brands take notice. While he wouldn't be averse to doing that, he's more focused on rugby. He's very unassuming. He just wants to play.

"Calmness is the word I'd use. Both his parents are calm people, so it's in the family. I'm always struck by his calmness. He always listens. He knows I have more experience about certain things because I'm 51, but some guys won't see it. Obviously, he's a very impressive rugby player but he's a very impressive man. It's going to be incredibly exciting watching him in the years ahead."

Diving lesson
Scoring against Wales

PICS Inpho & Sportsfile/Getty

“IT'S NICE WHEN PEOPLE

EAT

F.I.R.
ITALIA
ttoria
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WORDS: JOSH GRAHAM // PICTURES: TULLIO PUGLIA/GETTY IMAGES

Italy and Harlequins fly-half **TOMMY ALLAN** lifts the lid on being mates with England's Marcus Smith, Italy's rejuvenation and why he is returning to his first club Perpignan in the Top 14

UP THEIR OWN WORDS”

THERE IS a distinct whiff of "I told you so" in Tommy Allan's voice as he tries to explain Italy's rise from no-hopers to credible competitors in the past year.

By the end of the 2021 Six Nations, Italy had chalked up a 32nd straight defeat and the knives were out. Pundits were queuing up to demand the introduction of relegation to rugby's greatest championship. The noise only intensified after the *Azzurri* lost their first four games in 2022. However, the dazzling feet of rugby's newest superstar, Ange Capuozzo, set up a last-minute try for Edoardo Padovani which snapped their 36-game barren spell with a 22-21 win in Wales.

Capuozzo's standing in the game soared even higher last November when he scored two tries to help Italy beat Australia 28-27, an historic first win over the Wallabies in 19 attempts. ➡

➡ “It’s funny how a few months can change people’s minds,” says fly-half Allan. “We know we are good enough. We showed it in November and in the last game of the last Six Nations.

“That’s how sport is, you start performing and people’s perceptions change on the outside. We always knew we were good enough, we wanted to prove it to people but we proved it for ourselves mostly.”

Those two results came either side of a disappointing defeat to Georgia in Batumi over the summer, but that went largely under the radar in amongst the two giant-killings. *Los Lelos*, wearing a shirt emblazoned with the *Rugby World* logo, triumphed 28-19 for their first win over Tier One opposition.

Georgia have done plenty to bolster their case as the next cab off the Six Nations rank. A victory over Wales in Cardiff in the autumn proved the Italy triumph was no fluke.

But the clamour to see them introduced instead of the *Azzurri* has considerably died down and it’s hard to see the status quo changing anytime soon as things stand.

> **“Some people probably didn’t agree with what I did but it helped me a lot individually”**

“We were really gutted with the loss against Georgia, it was a very long tour. We felt like there were opportunities against them, some things didn’t go our way in that game,” explains Allan. “We believed in our process and our system. We targeted two wins in November and we were happy about the results.”

Kieran Crowley’s side beat Samoa before upsetting Australia and although South Africa ran riot in the second half of their final Autumn Nations Series fixture to prevail 63-21, it mattered little. The job had already been done. Italy, at last, had some credit in the bank.

“It proved we are good enough to compete against any team in the world. It’s nice when people eat up their own words and we managed to do it. It’s testament to the hard work of the players in the squad and how much they sacrificed to get better and better for their country,” says Allan.

Rome wasn’t built in a day but even the most ardent Italian supporter had their patience tested in the eight years between Six Nations wins. Fans across the world finally got their reward on that special March day in Cardiff and Allan was one of them, having opted to take a year out from playing for Italy in autumn 2021, following his move from URC side Benetton to Harlequins.

Paolo Garbisi slotted the winning conversion before collapsing to the floor and bursting into tears in iconic scenes. Allan, his usual rival for the No 10 shirt, watched on but never regretted the fact he could have been there with his team-mates.

FACT FILE

Age 29 (26 April 1993)
Born Vicenza, Italy
Club Harlequins
Position Fly-half
Height 6ft
Weight 14st 5lb
Italy caps 69
Test debut v Australia, November 2013
Instagram @tallan10

“I chose to go to Harlequins, I felt I needed a change of environment. I wasn’t enjoying my rugby as much and I wanted to give my all at Quins,” says Allan.

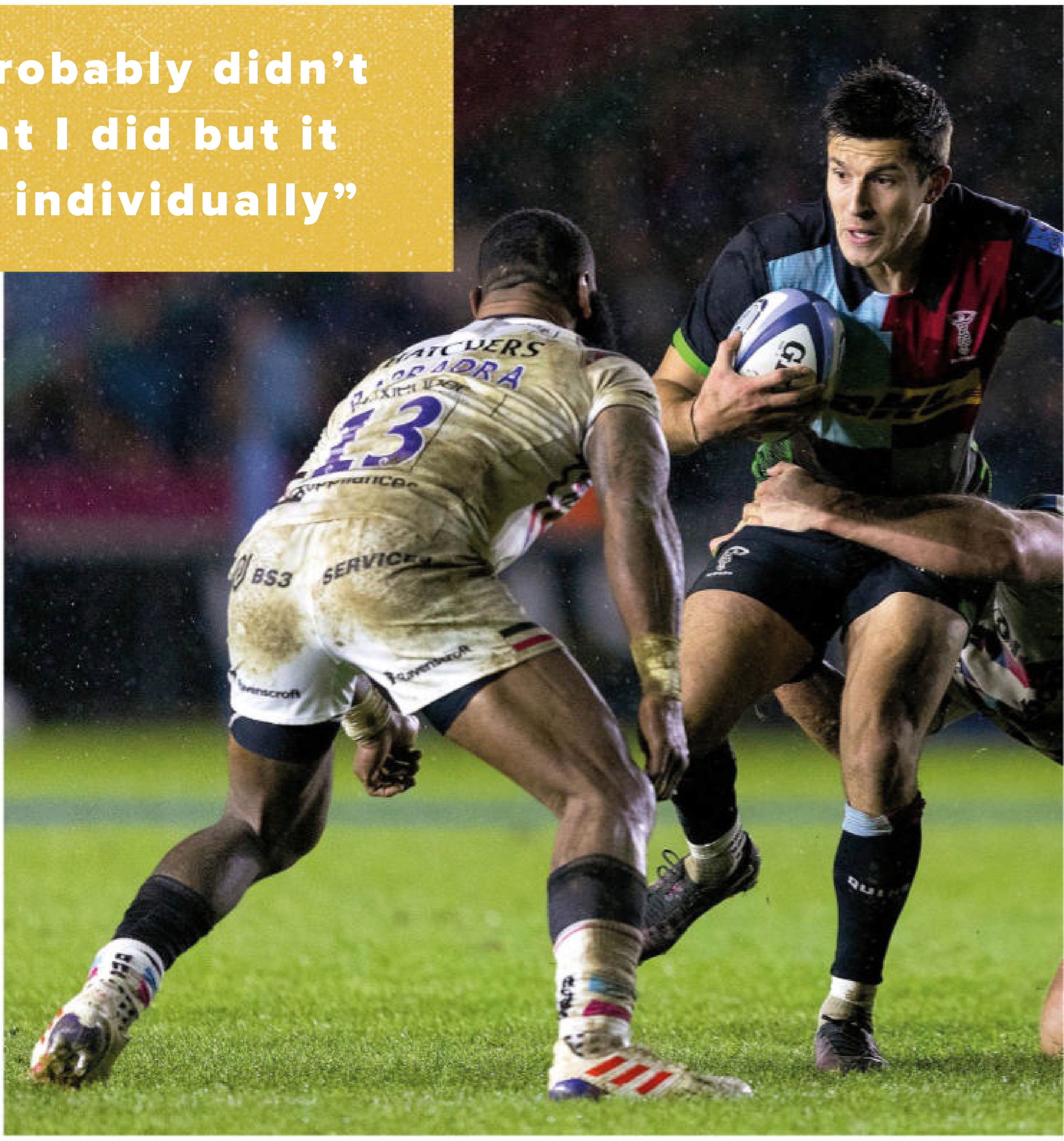
“I felt it was the best thing to do, take a step back from Internationals for a year and give my full focus to Harlequins. Some people probably didn’t agree with what I did, but it helped me a lot individually and I developed as a player as well.

“It’s something I spoke to them about before joining. Marcus (Smith) had just started playing for England and he got called up for the Lions. I knew, and was also hoping for him, that he’d be away and I’d get a lot more game time and that’s what happened.

“It did benefit me a lot, getting to play in the Premiership with some world-class players week in, week out and I was really happy with the way that things have panned out.”

While realistic about his on-field minutes being tied to Smith’s availability,

Body on the line Tackling England



Giving it his All Allan took a sabbatical from international rugby to focus on playing for Harlequins do not mistake that for Allan being happy to play second fiddle for both club and country.

"I don't see myself as a No 2 anywhere. I don't know what other people are saying but that's how I see it. I always try to be No 1, people can say what they want but it's not what I think."

That hasn't stopped him forming a close bond with the England star, who is nearly six years his junior. "We bounce off each other really well, we get along really well – he's a great kid. We both work hard, like our rugby and we talk about different ways we can improve Quins and the way we attack. We chat with Nick Evans every week.

"He's a special player, I've learnt a lot from him. It has been good playing alongside him and hopefully he's learnt a few things off me as well."

Following Martin Gleeson's departure, attack coach Evans may be in the mix to stay with England longer, despite the initial news of his appointment suggesting he would return to Quins at the end of the ongoing Six Nations. Or others may come calling. Can the club cope without the influential New Zealander? Allan thinks so, but three consecutive Premiership defeats after he took the job suggests the 2021 champions might struggle.

Back again
In his first spell at Perpignan

"Nick has been a central part of Harlequins since he was a player and as a coach as well, he's the core of the Quins attack," says Allan.

"I'm not sure about the ins and the outs of the contracts but it is an honour for him to coach England – it's the next level of coaching. You've got to hope for the best for him and if he does get it, it's great for him and the boys will have to adapt. I'm sure they'll find a way as Quins always do."

But that's not for Allan to worry about. His career will come full circle when he returns to Perpignan at the end of the season, the club where he started as a professional a decade ago.

"I'm looking forward to it a lot. I'm happy for my family as well, it's a nice city and a nice lifestyle. It will be great to be back in Perpignan. I loved every season I was there, so I'm really excited to be able to go back."

Allan's motivation to join Quins had a lot to do with a desire to test himself in the Premiership, having never played in it previously despite his schooling at RGS High Wycombe and presence in the Wasps academy as a teenager.

But as he returns to France, how do the two nations compare in his mind?

"I think the Premiership is very demanding physically, there's no easy games at all. It's tough to play week in, week out. It's probably the most competitive league in the world.

"But the Top 14 is a great league and a great spectacle as well. You get incredible crowds watching the games and the atmosphere is unbelievable. I'm looking forward to playing in it again."

Before he jumps back across the channel for good, Allan has other rugby business in France he wants to take care of with the World Cup in September fast approaching.

If selected, it will be Allan's third World Cup but Italy are yet to make a splash on the global scene, exiting at the earliest possible stage after finishing third in their pool in both 2019 and 2015.

However, after running the hosts France exceptionally close in their opening Six Nations game, Allan believes it is all to play for when the two meet again in their Pool A clash.

"I hope it's the closest World Cup we've ever seen. We had a taste against France and we know now that we can compete against them, so hopefully it will be a close World Cup and we can push the likes of those teams. In the World Cup, anything can happen really, so hopefully there will be a few upsets."

In a sign of how far they have come, Italy were the ones battering the French line at the death in the 29-24 defeat in Rome. They almost pulled off one of the tournament's great shocks and, if you ask Allan, did so without even playing well.

"We were so close to winning that game and we didn't even play well in the first half. We made a lot of mistakes, got a lot of details wrong and if we'd fixed those the game would have been completely different. That's a big positive if you look at it that way."

Crowley has instilled a new more attacking style into his troops, insisting he has a duty to entertain and Allan believes it is paying dividends.

"Kieran has done a great job with the set-up, we all believe in what he says. There's a lot of player responsibility with what we do. Comparing that to the previous regime (of Franco Smith), it's a lot more fun now and we are enjoying ourselves a lot more.

"The fans are enjoying watching our rugby, it's entertaining. We have fun on the field, it's fun to throw a ball around but we need to be smarter in the way we do it sometimes. We are enjoying it, it's better than just mauling all the time."

England showed the effectiveness of a direct mauling game in their 31-14 win over Italy at Twickenham, but the visitors have shown no signs of tempering their ambition just yet.

And the same can be said for Allan, who is balancing pulling the strings for Italy with a six-month-old baby at home, all the while keeping at least one eye on the big one later this year.

PICS AFP & Getty Images

umbro

I•Claudia

WORDS **ALAN PEAREY** // MAIN PIC **HANNAH PETERS/GETTY IMAGES**

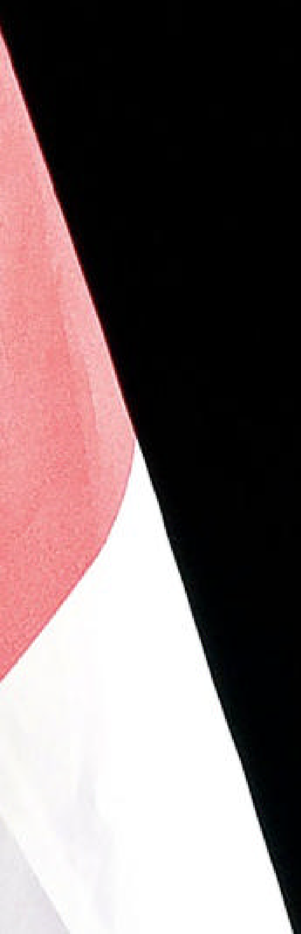
The wounds of World Cup failure run deep, says England's **CLAUDIA MACDONALD**, but the Women's Six Nations can launch an even more exciting journey

THERE WAS really only one place to start. England's gut-wrenching defeat in this season's World Cup final after a record-breaking 30-game winning run when they looked untouchable. In the match that mattered more than any other, New Zealand pipped them 34-31 after benefiting from an extra player from the 18th minute.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be at peace with how the World Cup ended," Claudia MacDonald tells us over coffee at the four-star hotel at Sandy Park. "Having said that, I've certainly moved on from it. I'm very much stuck into the Chiefs. The season, the next game that we have, whatever the competition is. I think that was my error at the last World Cup. I was so fixated on it for three or four years; the way that I was training, what I was or wasn't prioritising, was looking forward to that World Cup. And it's not healthy to put so much weight on one occasion. You forget to enjoy everything that happens along the way."

The Exeter wing refutes the suggestion that Lydia Thompson's early red card effectively decided that final in Auckland, seeing the incident merely as a "contributing factor". But she does take issue with those who branded England as 'boring' merely because they scored so many tries from their driving maul.

"We know we can score from anywhere. Through our forwards, through our wings. Our driving maul is particularly effective because of our →



Super Mac
Flying for Exeter against DMP Sharks

PICS Getty Images & Robbie Stephenson/JMP

➡ strength in depth – it's the same whether we've got our starters or finishers on the field. I don't think it negates our ability to score in other areas. You look at the try that Abby Dow scored against Canada, that was class."

The one from your brilliant run, you mean? She laughs. "I wasn't promoting myself there! Abby still covered 60 metres to score that try. And we scored some really exciting outside back tries at the World Cup. Could we score more of those? Yeah, probably. I guess it's just about having that belief in ourselves.

"And defences are becoming more effective. Take that semi-final against Canada, there was one try in it (26-19). They're another team whose driving maul is incredibly efficient. Emily Tuttosi was immense getting on the back of their mauls at the World Cup. We need to keep to what we do well, not get scared by being unfairly branded as boring. But also enjoy playing rugby, and creating opportunities elsewhere."

> **"We need to keep to what we do well, not get scared by being unfairly branded as boring"**

MacDonald, 27, has had a remarkable 12 months. This time last year she was coming to terms with the end of her career following a serious neck injury in the autumn 2021 Tests. She elected not to have surgery, which came with risks, and the RFU didn't renew her contract when it expired in June. She accepted a job in sustainable consultancy at PWC but did a swift U-turn after fresh scans suggested her body was healing far better than anyone could have predicted.

She returned to rugby, scored twice in a RWC warm-up against USA to book her place in England's squad, then got four tries in the RWC opener against Fiji. She played in all the toughest games that followed: France, Canada, New Zealand.

The injury uncertainty cast a cloud over her time at Wasps, whom she captained, and she felt she needed a change. Hence the move to Devon. Watching her against DMP Sharks the day after our chat, what struck you was how she floated behind the front line, left, right and centre, seeing and exploiting opportunities.

"That's what we encourage her to do, she has licence to explore," says Exeter Chiefs coach Susie Appleby. "She's amazing. She's brought real energy to our squad. As a player obviously she is world class, and versatile too because she can play wing or nine. Her energy and professionalism really complements what we're doing here and she's settled into how we play, which is a bit different to what she was used to before."

It's a match made in heaven, the player revelling in a Chiefs team that by late February had won every match bar their opener v Gloucester-Hartpury. "The set-up here is incredible," MacDonald says. "We train at Sandy Park, all our home fixtures are at Sandy Park, we do team runs at Sandy Park, our gym's here. And also having players from all over the world. I'd only ever learnt rugby from English Premier teams, so to be in the mix with Australians, Canadians, Americans, Italians, you get to learn from them, which is hugely exciting.

"We're second and happy with where we're at. But we understand we have to work incredibly hard if we want to finish in that top four and give ourselves a chance of making the final again. Sarries, Gloucester, Quins, Bristol – I wouldn't underestimate any of those teams. Even Sale, Worcester, I'd put them all on a par.

"The league is so competitive. At Chiefs we always talk about respecting the opposition, you have to prepare with the same intensity and drive no matter who you're playing. That wasn't in the league a few years ago but it is now."

Such focus comes naturally to MacDonald, who overcame the tragic loss of her mum to cancer when she was only 17. The family was not long back from Dubai, where they spent four years because of her dad's job in urban development. He presently works on The Line, a city in Saudi Arabia designed to have no cars or carbon emissions.

MacDonald played every sport going but was hooked on rugby after trying it at Durham University. Her brothers, Alex and Seb, are ex-players and younger sister Lydia plays social sevens. Claudia played 13 at uni but fell into wing and full-back. It was England backs coach Scott Bemand who initiated her switch to scrum-half, no doubt seeing a highly malleable player as she had only been in the sport for two years at that point.

She is nice as pie off the field but says: "You know when people say if you were a dog, what dog would you be? People always tell me I'd be a Jack Russell, which upsets me because I see that as small and yappy! I want to be a Golden Retriever but I'm a bit too temperamental."

We talk at length about her passion for sustainability, about how people can be inactive about doing anything at all because they're overwhelmed by the enormity of the climate crisis. She runs a blog called 'Let's Talk 1%' that focuses on reducing

FACT FILE

Age 27 (4 Jan 1996)
Born Epsom, Surrey
Position Wing or nine
Club Exeter Chiefs
Height 5ft 6in
Weight 10st 3lb
England caps 24
Instagram handle @claud_macdonald

RED ROSES SIX NATIONS FIXTURES

Sat 25 Mar	**Scotland**	4.45pm, Kingston Park
Sun 2 Apr	**Italy**	3pm, Franklin's Gardens
Sat 15 Apr	**Wales**	2.15pm, Cardiff Arms Park
Sat 22 Apr	**Ireland**	2.15pm, Musgrave Park
Sat 29 Apr	**France**	1pm, Twickenham

environmental impact and says that small actions – for example, travelling with your own Tupperware box and water bottle – can help bring valuable change.

We discuss, too, the decision to exclude DMP – a club she played for – from next season's Allianz Premier 15s. It means there will be no top-flight team north of Manchester. "I loved playing there and it's a massive shame there won't be a Premier team in the North," she begins.

"However, there's been a team up there for the last six years in the Premier 15s, we've tried to put rugby union on the map up there and it hasn't really taken. They've got two Championship teams in the North (Novocastrians and Bishop Auckland) and if we keep working on that, people will still have a place to watch and play rugby.

"Where we want the Premier 15s to go is towards professionalism. The more we push, the more we move towards clubs that can invest more, the whole game increases and the fluidity with which players can move between clubs becomes easier because they're not having to pick up their (non-rugby) career at the same time."

And so to this year's TikTok Women's Six Nations, the first of three before England hosts the next World Cup. It will mark the swansong of coaches Simon Middleton and Bemand, and MacDonald feels it's going to be hugely important.

"For players who were at the World Cup it's an opportunity to get back on the pitch. To challenge ourselves again, to reinforce our abilities, to remember the enjoyment we have in rugby. Because a lot of players came out of it having lost a bit of that. It certainly takes time to move on from a World Cup.

"This Six Nations is also an opportunity to see new players who could be ready for the next World Cup. To develop our squad and the talent that's out there, because in the Premier 15s there are so many exciting young players. Just at Chiefs, you've got Ebony Jefferies (23) and Maisy Allen (21), back-rowers who put their hand up every single game for their carries, tackles, work-rate. Maisy scored a brilliant try the other week on the wing, a proper swan dive in the corner! And then you've got fast backs as well, like Flo Robinson (21), Merryn Doidge (22), Nancy McGillivray (20)."

It will be a surprise if it doesn't come down to an England-France decider at Twickenham on the last day. Last year MacDonald watched the fixture in a Chiswick pub; this year she hopes to be out there mixing it on the field.

"France are a ruthless and relentless side. At the World Cup, one of the first tackles I was in against them felt like I was at the bottom of a wave in the ocean! I just didn't know which way was up, which way was down.

"And last time I played them at Twickenham, our subs flooded on and Scaz (Emily Scarratt) came over and said 'You alright, Claud?' I was (gasping) 'Yeah, yeah…' Me, Ellie (Kildunne) and Abby (Dow) were playing back three and we were absolutely knackered. Because you have to be. You have to give it everything.

"They are incredibly physical and well drilled, they like to play with their backs, ball in hand, they've got a good kicking game, a good length to their kicking game, and great strength and power up front. For us, playing France is always unbelievably exciting. You know you have to be at your best for the whole 80 minutes to come away with a win."

She has teed up the fixture, and the championship, very nicely. The journey to the 2025 World Cup starts here. RW

Smile!
Selfies for fans

Claud and master
Scoring against Italy in the 2021 Six Nations

SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 27 (6 Feb 1996)
Born Kutaisi, Georgia
Position Prop
Province Leinster
Height 6ft 2in
Weight 18st 3lb
Georgia caps Three
Instagram handle
@vakh_abdaladze

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Georgian Rugby, Getty Images & Inpho**

VAKH ABDALADZE

It's easy to see why Georgia have come calling for the Leinster loosehead

RUGBY WAS basically inevitable. For all the love young Vakhtang housed for Liverpool and the round ball in those heady days, there was no getting away from it – he was a young Georgian lad, in Dublin, and his father, Nikola, was a capped back-rower. And although he was a central midfielder, he was bulking up. He would become a different kind of set-piece threat.

Today Abdaladze is a loosehead for Leinster and last November he earned his first cap for his homeland of Georgia, coming off the bench against Uruguay. A special moment for his family.

You may be wondering how the prop ended up in Ireland as a kid anyway. He does.

"I've never really sat down and chatted to the parents about the ins and outs," he says. "But I kind of put two and two together. At that stage Georgia wouldn't have been as developed as Ireland and at the time there was a bit of struggle there. So the family decided to move over to Ireland in around '01 or '02.

"The Celtic Tiger was booming – this was way before '08 and the global recession! But they wanted potentially a better opportunity and as my grandfather had passed away close to then, my father would have been the only man in the family. I would have been five or six at the time."

Up in arms
In action for Leinster

Sport, you'll be unsurprised to hear, was a gateway into the new community. At home, Abdaladze explains, there were tales of his dad's exploits as well. The senior man only got a few caps and had a shortened career due to back injuries, but his son explains: "There's very funny tales which he still tells to this day. Because they would have only recently turned pro, so they were travelling to games in Romania, Netherlands. They have quite a few stories as a new professional era was coming in.

"I've never fact-checked this but there was one story of when they were playing in Romania and in their accommodation they must have had training or something and they were hanging their kits off the balcony – and all the kit got robbed. So they had to play Romania wearing a local club's kit."

A good tale, whatever the authenticity. And legends like that help build the desire to represent the *Lelos*. Because Abdeladze was an Ireland U20 player and he had fought through the Leinster age grades from the club system rather than the schools one – though whether or not that is more impressive or par for the course, it's lost on him anyway. He just kept playing his game.

There have been some hard days coming through injuries and at Leinster there is one of the most competitive classes of athletes you'll find in the sport. That's home for him now. But he also answered the calling of his native land. So what can he tell us about his recent experiences?

"It's definitely a massive honour and a privilege to be given the opportunity to come in here," he says of being in Georgia's camp. "The standard is ridiculously high and it's a step up in itself and yeah, constant challenges. And it's helping me grow my game.

"You get a different sense of play styles. Like, the scrum is an obvious one. It's a constant battle and I'm learning a lot here. They're some of the best scrummagers in the world, so that's a learning curve. And that's not to take away from lads at Leinster. You're talking about Tadhg Furlong, Andrew Porter, Church (Cian Healy) – they're world-class scrummagers. But you come up against different challenges, which is in my favour, to develop my arsenal even more."

Abdaladze is a note-taker. He doesn't like the idea of just training and moving on, hoping some of it is absorbed. He studies. He has one-on-one chats. He's crushing tape. And the feedback is interesting because it is clear there's a different mindset around set-piece for some of the key men.

What he needs to learn to do, though, is savour these moments.

"I've had two pretty bad injuries and my most recent one I was out for almost two years. And to be honest, even to get back to this level… Look, I probably criticise myself more than I should. Friends are always telling me to pat myself on the back.

"I should be proud to get to this level considering where I was starting off from when I got back from injury. So when the call came to come here, I jumped on it. My decision was definitely more influenced by family as well. Everything I tried to do is to make them proud, so if I know they're happy, then I'm happy.

"I've got family here in Georgia. And (against Germany) they'll see me play for the first time. To see family see me sing the anthem – not many moments top that."

The fight to make a World Cup begins, but there are few finer front-row finishing schools. RW

OUR TOP 3 ▼

GEORGIAN YOUNGSTERS

DAVIT NINIASHVILI
The Lyon full-back, 20, (below), is utterly electric on the attack

LUKA MATKAVA
The 21-year-old fly-half emerged as a talented pivot for Black Lion

TORNIKE JALAGONIA
The Biarritz flanker, 24, has seen plenty of game time lately

FUNNY HO

Peter Vardy
BLK
NATIONAL RUGBY CHAMPIONSHIP

NEST

GRATEFUL

A man of global influences with plenty of stories to tell, Scotland centre **SIONE TUIPULOTU** is proud of where he has ended up

WORDS **ALAN DYMOCK** // MAIN PICS **GETTY IMAGES/INPHO**

FLOAT LIKE a brushturkey, sting like a redback? There are many memories Sione Tuipulotu has of going round his Scottish granny's house when he was growing up in Australia, but the backyard boxing with his brothers, that stands out. Gran was quite some character...

"Obviously my granny is full-Scottish," Tuipulotu says. "We spent a lot of time in her house growing up, because Mum and Dad both worked. I'd love for anyone to get an interview with her! She's not that great with technology and stuff like that, but she's as Scottish as Scottish can get, and I'm really appreciative for having that time to grow up with her and have her influence on me, because not everyone gets to grow up with grandparents and I'm grateful for my granny.

➡

Sucking in defenders
Facing New Zealand

➡ "The funny thing is, we used to call her 'Annie' but her name is actually Jaqueline Thomson. But she'd instil these values in us.

"I can't remember heaps of them off the top of my head, but sometimes I'd bring my mates from the neighbourhood over to my gran's house and they couldn't understand my gran. But because we'd grown up with her, we knew her accent and we knew all of her sayings and stuff like that.

"She had this big backyard and we'd go back there and there was a big boxing bag, because my uncles were fighters growing up. So we'd punch the s*** out of the boxing bag in the backyard – well, to be honest, punch the s*** out of each other! – but she was really good looking after us and if anyone went too far, she'd be out the back with her fly swatter!"

The affection bursts out of Tuipulotu recalling those days in Melbourne with his Greenock-born granny. But then the Glasgow and Scotland centre is one of life's enthusiasts. Just get him on tunes.

Despite bagging 'Annie' for the odd Michael Bublé track, the centre feels like he soaked up his musical tastes from her and, predominantly, his parents. He calls himself "an old soul", so while he and his partner scooped up Beyoncé tickets recently, he's most likely to fall down a YouTube rabbit hole listening to old Marvin Gaye tracks. "I think music was way cooler back then," he says. "You could go and see them live in such an intimate setting and it was just… cool."

He has a record player, and has he ever tried to scratch it, like a DJ? You better believe he's given it a go in the past. It's his give-it-a-go nature that draws people to Tuipulotu. That and the sense of humility – he's willing to laugh at himself.

He may have been like this anyway, based on his upbringing. But pro rugby experiences have an impact too. His sporting paper-round on the way to Glasgow and starring for Scotland in the Six Nations had a few obstacles and vastly different neighbourhoods.

To understand how impressive he is today, let's delve into what he was like when he started out – when the world was at his feet in Melbourne.

"I'll tell you how much of a different player I am today," he starts. "When I was at the Rebels, I was much more of an athlete than a rugby player. And I think with all my experiences along the way – the ups and downs – you kind of just settle into what your game is, but I feel like I'm building towards that. I still feel like I've got so much work to go, on both sides of the ball.

"I hope when my career is done, I can say that I've worked on every skill and I've got the most out of myself and I became the most complete player.

"At the start of my career, I thought I was going to be a Wallaby by the time I was 20. Maybe I was naive to what was happening around me but I made my debut when I was 18 at the Rebels and you know, everything seems so perfect.

"But there was a coach change when I was 20 – the Western Force had just been cut and their coaching staff came to Melbourne. There was a lot of rejigging and I probably never settled into that rejig. You know, I learnt a lot about myself during that time. I went through playing a lot in my first two years to hardly playing in that first year when Dave Wessels arrived. We just never saw eye to eye and I made a decision to leave after a couple of years of him being coach. To be honest, it was the best decision I ever made."

This was a young man with an admittedly comfortable life. Billed for big things, he grew up in Frankston and made the short commute to Melbourne every day. Surrounded by family and on the pre-planned pathway to success.

Then he was off to Japan, to join what was then called Yamaha Júbilo (now Shizuoka Blue Revs). Awaiting him there was cousin Viliami Tahitu'a, which helped, but there was a lot of growing up to do. He was finally having to clean his own pants, he laughs.

But he adds: "He had gone through his own personal issues growing up. He's from South Auckland and he told me about his struggles growing up and what it took for him to become a pro player and get to Japan and be earning good money and be

Dominant displays
For Glasgow Warriors

Eventful day Tuipulotu picked up two tries and a yellow card during a frenetic 52-29 win against Argentina in November

PICS Getty Images, Inpho & SNS Group

FACT FILE

Age 26 (12 Feb 1997)
Born Frankston, Victoria, Australia
Team Glasgow
Position Centre
Height 5ft 10in
Weight 16st 5lb
Scotland caps 13

First sojourn Tuipulotu during his stint with Yamaha. ‘Japan gave me the courage to take a risk,’ he says

well respected in the team. I looked at his life and how he handled himself, how he prioritised in terms of family and God and then rugby. I learned a lot from him.”

Something Tuipulotu had already settled in his mind, though, was that he had what it took to be an elite, Test-level rugby player. There was work to do to get there, sure, but he had *the stuff*.

He says he “wrestled back” his confidence after falling out of the Rebels outfit. But he says: “For me, I just didn’t want to end my career staying in Japan knowing that I didn’t really have a crack and take a risk. And I think I learned those life lessons in Japan to give me the courage to take that risk. To have the faith to move over halfway across the world (to Glasgow), away from my family, and back myself to try and get the most out of my career.

“I’m not there yet. But I just want to get going. I just want to kick on now.”

What you see today is a regular for club and the country he qualified for through his granny. He started the Six Nations in sizzling form. And we’ll get to the rugby. But the fact he is so deep in the mix is notable because last year, you may remember, he was one of a handful of players who fell foul of Gregor Townsend and Scotland’s team rules, when celebrating a win over Italy by staying out longer than was deemed acceptable within the group. Finn Russell’s part in all that was covered forensically, but Tuipulotu would not spend too long in the bad books.

He says of that incident: “When I came over here I wasn’t the finished product and I’m still not the finished product. I’m gonna make mistakes, you know, further down the line. I hope there’s not too many! But I had a lesson from that night after Italy. I think all the boys did to be honest. We’re at a point now where we have a good understanding of what’s expected of us when we’re in camp, at the weekend, at training, and I’m fully aware of that. I just want to meet those standards, to get the best out of myself, for Scotland but also for myself.”

“I’m not oblivious to the fact my big strength is carrying ball. But adding skills helps your carrying”

Grab bag
Against Chile

Tuipulotu has found a home. When contract negotiations came up recently, there were nibbles from abroad, but there was a desire to skip the settling-in process somewhere else, again. His partner works for a whisky company in Glasgow, Douglas Laing, and he has conquered the West End. They are hitting gigs around the country when they can, but above all else the couple are settled. There is a sense, Tuipulotu says, of that family feel once again.

Playing good rugby helps too. A key component of the Franco Smith Warriors, he has formed a strong centre partnership with Huw Jones. Initially dubbed ‘Huwipulotu’, the 26-year-old says “when we first heard that we kind of just ran with it”, but it’s the on-the-hoof action that intrigues.

Against England, with a defence screaming up, Tuipulotu had the speed of thought and foot to grubber through. Jones had the perfect lane to score from the kick. And it’s an understanding honed in Glasgow.

“It’s something we worked really hard on at Glasgow and I’ve done a lot of work with Pete Horne and Franco and Nigel Carolan as well, developing that skill because it has proved to be quite lethal. But Shug (Jones) also sees the game similar to how I see it.

“We’re quite often on the same wavelength when we’re attacking, which helps because we don’t really need time to think and organise stuff. We’re always on the same page.”

With defences primed these days to watch for 50:22s or an all-or-nothing blitz, there is plentiful opportunity to roll kicks through. But if that’s what defences expect of Sione now, they might sit off him. Win-win. For him, he wants to do the unexpected.

His idol, he says, was Ma’a Nonu. He was revered as a destructive carrier, but had a tool kit of skills he could use, yet his kicking rarely got deserved plaudits. Tuipulotu says: “I’m not oblivious to the fact that my big strength is carrying ball. But I think if you add all the little skills around it, it ends up helping your carrying, because then people have to wonder what you’re about to do.

“If you look at all the tries that were set up off the boot at Glasgow, most of them are late in the game. And that’s because of the work that’s done prior to that. If you are carrying hard for 60 minutes, maybe in the last 20 minutes people are expecting that.”

It’s hard to put an invisibility cloak on a player like Tuipulotu. But perhaps it will suit him for the soft skills to go unremarked on for as long as possible. He will keep tinkering away. He wants you to be shocked when he produces his next record scratch moment. RW

On the whistle

Words **Sarah Rendell** | Main Images **Getty Images**

The Allianz Premier 15s is becoming ever more professional – but is the officiating lagging behind? Rugby World investigates

WOMEN'S RUGBY is one of the fastest-growing sports in the country. Millions watched the World Cup last year, with 1.7 million tuning in to England's loss to New Zealand in a thrilling final in November. The Women's Six Nations is breaking attendance records and the Red Roses are going to play their first stand-alone game at Twickenham during the 2023 tournament. Allianz Premier 15s matches are attracting more fans. League games are being streamed by the BBC and the knockout rounds broadcast on BT.

The professionalism is on the rise too. Wales and Italy are now among countries to have introduced player contracts and over recent seasons clubs have paid match fees. But the refereeing in the Premier 15s is not fully professional

Eyeing a gap Loughborough’s Chloe Rollie takes on Harlequins

➡ and can create questions for casual fans. Are there television match officials (TMOs) in the women’s top flight? Are referees full-time? And do the Premier 15s have access to a citing commissioner? Here *Rugby World* explains how officiating works in the league and players speak on the experiences they have had…

IN THE Premier 15s a TMO is not used in the majority of the fixtures. The only time there is a TMO present is when games are televised. This is during Harlequins’ Big Game, which takes place once a season, and for the league’s semi-finals and final. This means all try decisions, high tackles and all the split-second choices made by players during games are refereed by the officials on the pitch (one referee and two assistant referees).

There have been examples of incidents being missed by officials, with Saracens hooker May Campbell tweeting screenshots of high tackles which did not even result in a penalty. Her club team-mate Poppy Cleall has pointed out times where Campbell herself suffered from a high shot, saying: “Who’d sign my petition to make May Campbell a protected species? Sick to death of watching the poor girl’s head get taken off and the refs blinking at that precise second.”

Speaking to *Rugby World*, Campbell detailed an occasion where a high tackle made on her knocked her tooth out but went unnoticed by the officials.

“We were playing against Gloucester-Hartpury nearly two years ago and I was high tackled with a shoulder to the mouth,” she says. “I was wearing a gumshield, I’m always keen on wearing them. I had to get one of my front teeth removed and I’ve got an implant put in.

“That at the time wasn’t picked up. If it has resulted in my tooth being knocked out, surely it was definitely high.”

> “It was a more enjoyable game to play in. It helped that he referred to us by our names”

When asked what she thinks must change in order for more penalties or cards to be given for similar incidents, she says: “I think the touchjudges need to be a lot more aware of what is happening in front of them.

“There is such a big discrepancy between the tackles that are made and cited in the men’s game compared to the women’s. We have far fewer infringements when I don’t think the incidents are too dissimilar between the two. It helps (the men’s game) having another option in the TMO, having it in slow motion. So it’s whether or not we can bring those facilities in.

“I think (assistant ref improvement) comes with them being full-time and knowing that their role is to ensure the safety of players. That is the only reason why I have tweeted about it before, because of the player welfare side of it.”

The Rugby Football Union (RFU), who are the governing body and in charge of the league, confirmed to *Rugby World* that there are no “immediate plans to expand the use of TMOs” but it is something they “will continue to consider as the league develops”.

THE OFFICIALS used in the Premier 15s are mainly part-time, but full-time referees are taking charge of games more often. For example, Wayne Barnes refereed Quins’ game against Bristol Bears in December. The RFU has plans to facilitate more professional officials overseeing matches. The governing body has committed to saying each professional referee within the professional match officials appointment team will officiate in the Premier 15s when the fixture schedule allows. Full-time referees such as Barnes, Ian Tempest, Adam Leal, Hamish Smales and Jack Makepeace have all refereed in the league already this season.

Harlequins and England prop Bryony Cleall was a part of the game where Barnes took charge and has spoken highly of the on-field experience.

“I just felt playing that game, he let it flow,” she tells *Rugby World*. “From that there were fewer scrums and restarts. Ultimately it was a more enjoyable game to play in. It helped that he referred to us by our names, which went a really long way. Not going to lie, he called me Poppy (her twin sister who plays for Saracens) at one point but I forgave him.

“He had that ability to talk to us and be really clear. No one had to ask questions because he had already told us. So when he made a decision, no one could question it because it was really clear.

“When I watch games in the Premier 15s, we have a large number of players walk back or be told off by the ref. But often it’s because they have no idea what the ref’s given it for or where it came from, so they want to know why.”

While Cleall values experiences she has when full-time referees come to

Line breaker Back-row Marlie Packer springs towards a try for Saracens in last year's Premier 15s final

officiate the Premier 15s, she wants to eventually see professional referees dedicated to the women's top flight.

She adds: "As women's rugby players we (England) had 32 people go professional, so why can't the refs have two people who ref our league go professional? Not all of them (at once) but a couple of them to have the ability to be professional. They could then stay with us and referee and help us.

"Women's rugby is different to the men's side of things in what we do at breakdowns. We do things slightly differently in how we play and how we interact with each other. The TMO will be years away but if we could improve the refereeing that would be huge."

Another element that Cleall believes would improve the officiating would be if there was more collaboration between the referees and the players. It's routine for England to welcome a referee into camp but Cleall says she's not experienced this in the Premier 15s.

"I'd love to collaborate with referees," she says. "I have never had a referee for the league come into the club and talk to us. Refs come into England camp, they come in and ref us and it's helpful. We talk to them and ask them questions.

"At the Premier 15s level, the morning after a game I want to email the people in charge of the refs but there is never a communication channel open."

The RFU says the league's referee manager has visited and offered to visit clubs. They add that the pro game match official team are "always keen to grasp these opportunities to develop relationships and understanding both ways to improve the match-day experience and outcomes".

And when asked if they have plans for full-time dedicated referees for the Premier 15s, the RFU responded: "There simply are not enough games within the Allianz Premier 15s season to justify the number of refs to be full-time for only this league."

IF FOUL play is missed by referees in a game, there is another way players can be punished which takes place after the match is over – through the citing commissioners. These are independent officials appointed by the RFU who are able to cite a player for foul play which they believe warrants a red card. The process of citing in the Premier 15s follows the same as the one performed in the men's Premiership and Championship.

The citing commissioner can review footage of matches on their own volition or it can be submitted by clubs, if they disagree with an on-field decision. The footage submitted for the women's top flight comes from two sources. The first is via streaming cameras, with two games streamed (out of five) per round.

The second is footage from cameras set up by the clubs themselves. The citing committee and referees have access to all of the footage. However, Campbell says often they don't quite have the right angle or the footage is not clear enough for an incident to be cited. This means incidents could not only be missed in game time but they may go unpunished after the fact.

The RFU has a minimum requirement of two angles for disciplinary and citing purposes – a side tight and a side wide angle. The governing body says there is guidance and minimum standards for footage quality and format. Standards are applied to both the club's own footage and images from a stream that includes uninterrupted footage that focuses on the game, not the crowd.

"Quality (of club footage) will rely on equipment and the operator, which is the club's responsibility," the RFU tell us. "We work with the clubs to support their operational staff but don't currently dictate the quality of equipment needed."

And so in the Premier 15s, officiating has some areas of progression and some elements which remain amateur. The referee standard is something the RFU are looking to improve with more professionals overseeing matches. But there are no immediate plans to bring in TMOs or dedicated full-time referees. RW

● *What do you think? Email your views to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com*

Awarding a penalty
Ref Adam Wookey

PICS CameraSport & Getty Images

JAC

Cymru V Georgia

WORDS **ALAN PEAREY** // MAIN PIC **IAN COOK/CAMERASPORT/GETTY**

Back-rows have come and gone like buses for Wales. But in Ospreys youngster **JAC MORGAN**, they have a player who is here to stay

TO THE FUTURE

PLUS POINTS have been thin on the ground for Wales this season. A string of defeats, many of them heavy, preceded the extraordinary impasse between players and union over contracts, a dispute that put the staging of the Wales v England fixture in serious jeopardy.

Before *RW* sits down to chat to Jac Morgan, we've already been told that questions about the contracts issue are off limits. No worries. We were not expecting the young back-row to give us chapter and verse on the subject, but a sign of just how delicate things are at present came when we asked whether he was in the Wales leadership group. "Um..." replied Morgan after a pause before Verity Williams, the team's estimable communications manager, interjected with: "We do have a group but we don't necessarily always commit to who's in it."

Whatever role Morgan plays off the field, he is surely destined for stardom on a grand scale. Last autumn, he ➡

➡ made a storming impact when coming on against Argentina, then bagged a try double against both Georgia and Australia.

Warren Gatland, his now Wales head coach, called him a one-man wrecking machine, Jonathan Davies dubbed him “amazing” and Gareth Anscombe hailed him as a “revelation”. Sam Warburton has even compared him to the reigning World Rugby Player of the Year.

“He’s almost a carbon copy of Josh van der Flier. They’re so identical, I don’t think there’s two sevens in international rugby who are so alike,” said the former Lions captain. “It looks like he’s going to be the guy who could potentially be a future Wales captain. A lot of guys have worn that seven shirt in the last five years – Justin Tipuric, Josh Navidi, Taine Basham, Ellis Jenkins. He’s had it now for the past few months and it doesn’t look like he’s going to let it go.”

Force and footwork On his Test debut v Scotland

Such plaudits could turn a young man’s head but Morgan’s feet are planted in the ground. This is a player who, during a chat with Aberavon’s hierarchy about the possibility of joining the Wizards, asked, “What can I do to help Aberavon improve?”

> “It would be a great honour and privilege to captain Wales. But I haven’t thought about it much”

If he feels the pressure of being lauded as the Next Big Thing, you would never know it. “I tend not to think about it all. Things that get said, I don’t tend to read it,” says Morgan, 23. “I like to go training and then switch off, concentrate on what I’ve got. Whether that’s playing for the Ospreys or training in the week or whatever’s going on. And friends and family are pretty good. I think they know I can be a little bit laid-back so they don’t bother me (about media talk).”

Is it an ambition of yours to captain Wales? He hesitates. “I’m not too sure to be honest,” he says, warily. “Obviously it would be a great accolade to captain Wales, I did it with the U20s and enjoyed it. It would be a great honour and privilege to do it. I haven’t really thought too much about it. I’m just trying to think about what’s going on at the minute.”

Rugby is in Morgan’s veins. His grandfather, Garth, and father, Rhodri, both played before him and one of Jac’s fondest memories is of him and his dad coming off the bench to play together for Brynamman 2nds.

“My father was always supportive of me when I was younger. Every weekend I was probably nagging him as a kid to take me out in the fields. He told me that as long as I enjoy it that’s the main part of rugby. As long as you’re happy.”

His dad works on a building site as a surveyor, mum works for the council. His sister, Ellie, represented Wales in sevens last summer. A Welsh speaker, Jac played for Cwmtwrch RFC from U8 to U16 and his intellect and leadership qualities were evident even then. At 16, he was strong-minded enough to drink water or an energy drink when those around him sought beer.

Back then, he played football on Saturdays, rugby on Sundays. In rugby he was a centre until about ten years old, a scrum-half too on occasions, the position his dad played. But from ten he began playing in the back row and when it came to role models from the elite game, one man stood out.

“Richie McCaw was brilliant, he could do everything. He was the best player when I was growing up. It was great watching him, seeing all the success he had in New Zealand.”

Have you tried to emulate him in your own play? “Not really. I’ve always tried to learn from different players, see their different strengths and weaknesses. I

Cole burner Powering away from the Leicester Tigers prop for Ospreys

PICS AFP, Getty Images & Inpho

FACT FILE

Age 23 (21 Jan 2000)
Born Sketty, Swansea
Position Back row
Club Ospreys
Height 5ft 11in
Weight 16st
Wales caps Eight
Instagram handle @jacmogs7

like learning from Tips (Tipuric) and Toby (Faletau) here, they've played for years. And at the Ospreys you've got Lyds (Dan Lydiate) and others in the back row. We try to learn from each other."

In his late teens, Morgan started a mechanical engineering apprenticeship, designing parts and dealing with orders for a Llansamlet-based company, Morganite Electrical Carbon Ltd. He enjoyed the work but not the challenge of juggling it with a rugby career that was starting to soar. By then he was with the Scarlets academy.

"When I was 19 I played my first year at U20s, we played our Six Nations and the Junior World Cup in Argentina. Full credit to Wales, they were brilliant with me, they gave me a lot of time off so I could experience everything. I'd work from 8 o'clock to 2 o'clock, then drive to the Vale to train for about 3 o'clock and then be at home for 10 o'clock in the evening. I'd do that most days of the week which was pretty tough. I took unpaid leave to play at the World Cup.

"Going into the second year of U20s, there was supposed to be a World Cup in Italy (before Covid struck) and it didn't look as if I was going to get the time off again. So I thought if there was ever a time to go professional and give it a shot it was then."

A nation breathed a sigh of relief. His raging-hot form for club and country, based on his prowess as a jackler and tackler but with plenty else thrown in, even the confidence to kick off both feet, saw the Ospreys snatch him from Scarlets in 2021.

His senior Wales debut came in February 2022, in a 20-17 win against Scotland. When he was ignored for last year's summer tour, being told he needed to be more physical in the contact area, he responded by putting on muscle. In build, he is slightly shorter than former Osprey Sam Underhill but has the same menacing bearing. He has also worked hard at getting his hands on the ball more, becoming a carrier as well as a fetcher and destroyer.

It came to fruition last autumn when he made 43 carries and beat 13 defenders to go with 69 tackles and all those tries.

Already he has worn six, seven and eight for his country, Morgan saying: "Openside is my preferred position but I don't really mind which because how I play doesn't change much. The only difference is that a couple of positional areas on the field might change."

The turnovers have dried up a bit, however, and when the team to face England was announced, his name was missing. He's still adjusting to the demands of rugby at the highest level.

"International rugby is tough," he says. "It's a lot faster than regional rugby and a higher intensity – every collision, every tackle, every carry is tougher. All teams are very good in the contact area, especially the clean-out, so there's limited opportunities in a game where you can go for turnovers."

Gatland's return to power has brought a new system and there was no fairytale start as Wales went down 34-10 and 35-7 in early February. "Our discipline really let us down in the first two games. We gave away far too many penalties which put us under a lot of pressure and gave the other teams field position to attack against us."

The red zone stats make particularly grisly reading, with Wales given an 'efficiency' rating of 17% against Ireland – 11 entries into the 22 at an average of 0.91 points per entry – and a barely believable 7% against Scotland. "Yeah, we're working on finishing, definitely, but we're working on it all. Trying to get better, trying to be a bit more clinical so we can come away with more points."

We ask about the Champions Cup, a competition in which his late try at Tigers sealed a first knockout tie for Ospreys for 13 years. He seems more at ease discussing how the Welsh region turned their fortunes around in mid-season.

"We had a lot of defeats but there were a couple where we only just lost, so I think we always knew we were close," he says. "When we lost to Leicester at home, everyone was disappointed because we felt we should have come away with a win. Playing against them, the English champions, gave us confidence and it was a real kick in the right direction for us.

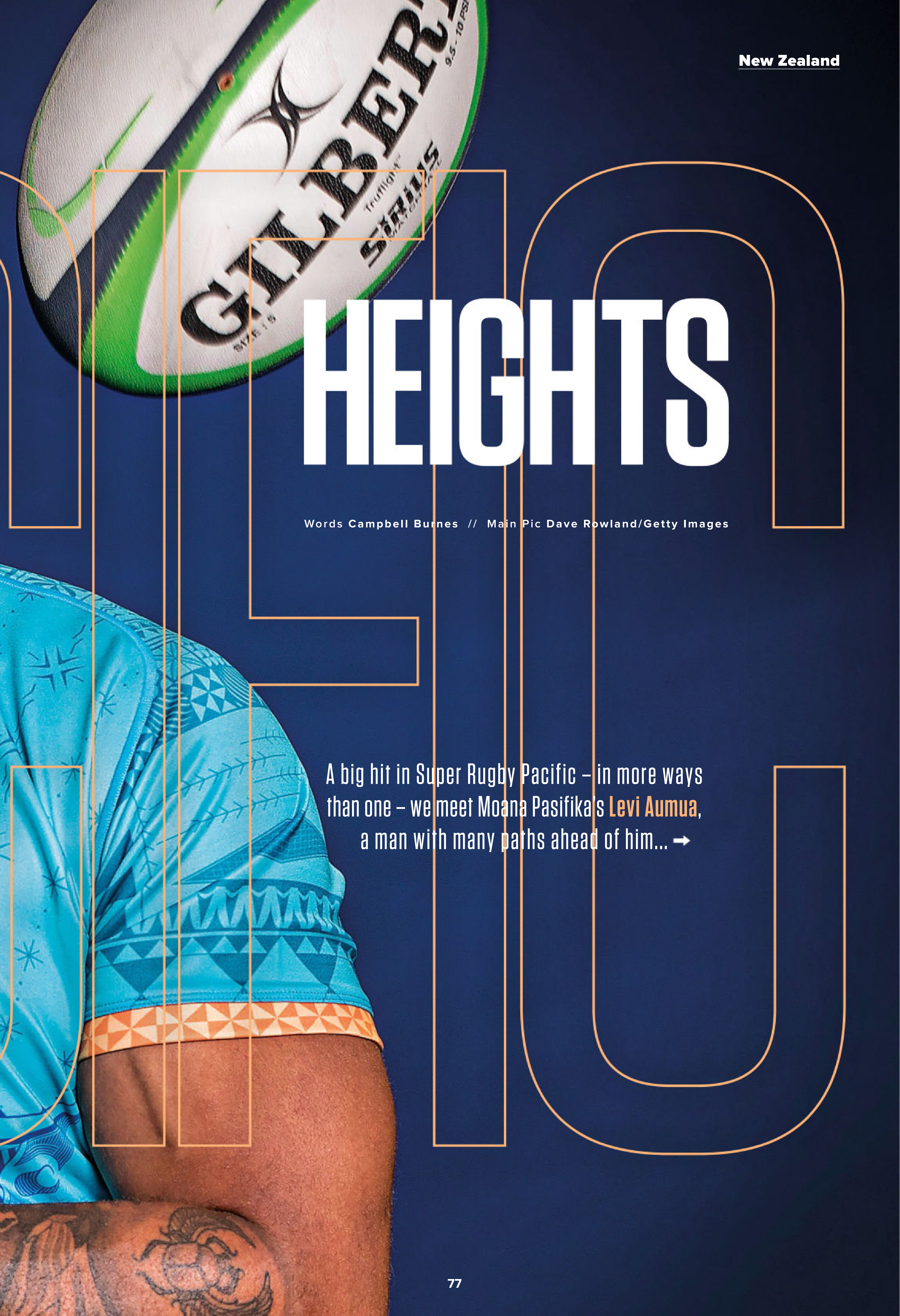
"So we knew we had a lot of confidence going into the Montpellier away game, it was just a case of expressing ourselves and that win kicked us forward again.

"I'm looking forward to the (Round of 16) match at Saracens. It's very exciting to play against a team like Saracens, it's going to be a hell of an experience. It's knockout rugby which is what everyone wants to play."

Knockout rugby for a knockout player. Jac Morgan is a name you'll hear plenty more of in the years to come.

Jac knife
Cutting through Ireland

PAC
DYNASTY
MOANA
PASIFIKA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Words Campbell Burnes // Main Pic Dave Rowland/Getty Images

A big hit in Super Rugby Pacific – in more ways than one – we meet Moana Pasifika's **Levi Aumua**, a man with many paths ahead of him... ➡

LAST SEASON was moving year in the professional rugby life of Levi Aumua.

In his first full Super Rugby campaign, after a brief taste of this level for the Blues in 2019, he was the most consistent back for Moana Pasifika. Then he performed well for a misfiring Tasman Mako outfit. The season would finish on tour with the All Blacks XV and a couple of outings for the Barbarians under Scott 'Razor' Robertson.

At 28, Aumua says his rugby career has been a "rollercoaster".

"Much of that was around the ability to focus on what was required as a professional rugby player. It has taken a while but over the last 18 months I've been able to lock down what is required. It's all sinking in now," says the affable, Auckland-born midfielder.

Such is his growing level of professionalism that he even came for this interview at Moana Pasifika HQ despite a stomach upset. Others might have pulled the pin but Aumua fronted.

"Playing for the All Blacks XV put me in two minds as it's been an aspiration to wear the black jersey"

He's been fronting on the field too. In the NPC he was, along with Billy Proctor and Josh Timu, one of the top centres, and was almost unstoppable when playing against Northland in scoring a brace and setting up tries.

The Levi Aumua rugby journey has been a long and winding road, kicking off at the Waitakere and Waitemata clubs in West Auckland, then through Wellington, Perth and Brisbane. Aged 22, he came back to New Zealand and found a home at the Mako.

Spreading his wings One of Aumua's tattoos

His roots lie in Samoa, through his father Steve, and the villages of Afega and Sapunaoa, while on his mother's side comes his Fijian heritage, stemming from the province of Tailevu. He was able to bring out that heritage when signing for Moana Pasifika. It wasn't so much about doing a Samoan siva in front of the team, though...

"We all express our cultures differently," he says. "The tradition of a kava ceremony is quite common within all of our cultures. We did that as a whole organisation and said where we were from.

"That (heritage) was one of the things I had to have a good think about. Coming into a team like this, I knew it wouldn't just be about the rugby. From day one, I have felt that."

Aumua knows he can carry effectively and tackle with venom, but he wants to develop his passing and kicking games to become that so-called triple threat on attack. He had some ups and downs in 2022, scoring three tries but copping a yellow card for an accidental head clash against the Hurricanes in the match that finished in glorious technicolour as Moana Pasifika won in extra time with a golden point.

He was also stood down for a match due to a breach of team protocols around Covid-19. All valuable lessons for him. Of course, there were the three 'storm weeks' (playing several games in a short period of time) and squad and travel disruption to deal with.

Through it all, Aumua had a helpful hand from his coach Aaron Mauger.

"I absolutely love Aaron. He's a friend as much as a coach. I can reach out to him comfortably. He gives me a lot of feedback at every training session. He keeps an eye on the midfielders, that's his bread and butter," Aumua says.

The feeling is certainly mutual.

Mauger says: "We're really proud of where Levi got his game to. He was a staple in our back-line and instrumental.

Steamroller Carrying hard through contact against the Rebels at AAMI Park

FACT FILE

Age 28 (9 Oct 1994)
Born Auckland
Position Centre
Franchise Moana Pasifika
Height 6ft 1in
Weight 17st
Instagram handle @levi_aumua_

There in black and white Aumua on his way to a try for the Barbarians at Bath last autumn

PICS Getty Images

Shoulder to the wheel
Defending against Chiefs

He creates opportunities and gets over the gain-line. He was key to our team last year and we expect similar in 2023."

Aumua's midfield mates in 2023 will come from, as was often the case in 2022, Fine Inisi, Henry Taefu and Danny Toala. They all carry different qualities but Aumua can work with any of the trio.

"We also had Solomone Kata last year. Danny is quite skilful with ball in hand, a good distributor. Fine can play 12 or 13 and has pace. It's good to have guys you can rely on. We're not short of X-factor in the backs," says Aumua.

Many pundits will write off Moana Pasifika's chances of challenging for the Super Rugby Pacific play-offs, but Aumua knows what this group is capable of with more consistency to their game and a touch of luck.

"Every game you see glimpses of a top-six performance but we know what we need to do now."

The players are fitter than 12 months ago, too. "We had honest feedback around that at the end of last season. There was a bit of an issue there. So we did hit the road earlier this season and the boys have given it their all."

Two matches were circled on the draw by Aumua. The 25 February opener against Fijian Drua at Mt Smart Stadium may have seen divided loyalties in Aumua's parents' house, while on 14 April Moana Pasifika head to Apia for an historic match against Queensland Reds.

"When I saw the draw and that we were heading to Samoa to play, all my family and friends were really excited. I'm pumped to play back there (having not been back to Samoa for two years). I didn't get the chance to play the Drua last season either," the player says.

Aumua's selection for the All Blacks XV on their recent tour sparked strong comment from Manu Samoa coach Seilala Mapusua around why the All Blacks were even looking at Moana Pasifika players, when the premise of the team was to create pathways for the likes of Manu Samoa and 'Ikale Tahi Tonga.

"I sat down and had a good think: 'Why me?' I thought I had a good first season with Moana and then with Tasman. For me, it did say where I might be ranked in the nation," Aumua says.

His eligibility is still open for Samoa, Fiji or New Zealand. Three options. So he may have some tough calls to make in the not-too-distant future.

"I haven't given a whole lot of thought to playing for Manu Samoa or Fiji. I know there's a bit of tension between Mum and Dad around that," he laughs. "But playing for the All Blacks XV did put me in two minds because it's always been an aspiration to wear the black jersey. Only time will tell..."

In the meantime, however, Aumua only has eyes for Moana Pasifika and lifting this vibrant team up into the Super Rugby Pacific play-offs picture.

PICKING A FLAG

Several players have options in the Pacific should they reach international level. Here are some of the best

DU'PLESSIS KIRIFI

Son of a Samoan father and Kiwi mother, Hurricanes flanker Kirifi has flirted with the New Zealand national side in the past without getting the big call for the Men in Black

KINI NAHOLO

Younger brother of All Black Waisake, this fellow wing was also born in Fiji but plies his trade out wide for the 'Canes

LIMA SOPOAGA

Already capped at ten for New Zealand, Sopoaga has served the stand-down period which means he could now play for Samoa if selected – or the Cook Islands if he wants!

NATHAN HUGHES

Another who has had a lengthy break from Test rugby, former England No 8 Hughes is currently playing in Japan but has declared allegiance to Fiji. He also qualifies for Samoa

OLI JAGER

A little different this one but Irish prop Jager, a regular for the Crusaders for a residency period, has firmly stated his position. "I've made it pretty clear in the last couple of years that I want to be an All Black," he said last year

Options
Flanker Kirifi

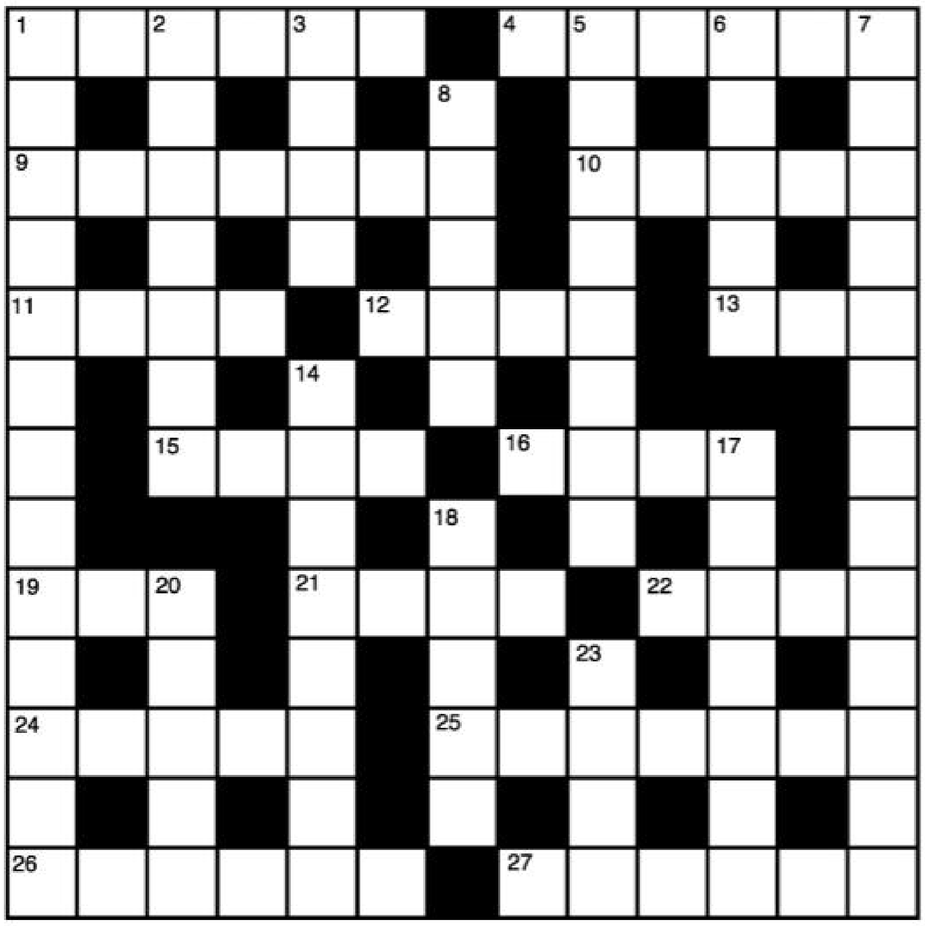
CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 The jumping stag on this Gloucester club's logo came from a beer bottle (6)
4 - - - pass, play that changes the direction of the attack (6)
9 Pro referee Ian on England Rugby's books – a stormy fellow? (7)
10 Gabby - - - , Six Nations TV presenter (5)
11 Stormers coach John Dobson pleaded for help concerning long - - - flights (4)
12 - - - Adams, Wales wing who played in the 2021 Lions series decider (4)
13 - - - McLoughlin, Irish legend who died in November 2021 (3)
15 Span around for a recent study that found 86% of rugby players take pre-match ones (4)
16 For a tackle from behind, you want to - - - your arms around the hips/legs of the ball-carrier (4)
19 Wood, initially a legendary footballer, played for Gloucester against the Original All Blacks in 1905 (3)
21 - - - Fickou, France centre (4)
22 Boks scrum coach - - - Human won two Heineken Cups with Toulouse (4)
24 - - - Cinti, Puma at London Irish (5)
25 Jamie - - - , the only uncapped player in Ireland's initial Six Nations squad (7)
26 Clermont's favourite colour? (6)
27 "The atmosphere was - - - ," said Quins scrum coach Adam Jones of the 2021 Premiership final (6)

DOWN

1 English referee who took charge of Italy v France last month (7,6)
2 Bath hooker called up by England after injury to George McGuigan (3,4)
3 The opposite of blind? (4)
5 Drill Huw sharpened for ex-Scotland U20 prop in the Premiership... (4,4)
6 ...he left Glasgow to become a - - - (5)
7 London Irish youngster who scored for England against Italy in round two of this year's Six Nations (5,8)
8 "The walk over from the - - - was brilliant," said Quins scrum coach Adam Jones of the 2021 Premiership final (5)
14 Mirco - - - , Petrarca prop propelled into Italy's initial Six Nations squad (8)
17 - - - Wolf Pack, team from Calgary (7)
18 Type of runner used to cause deception (5)
20 Owen Farrell is the - - - point of the England side, said Steve Borthwick (5)
23 Obano loses nothing for - - - Lorne, Magnus Bradbury's junior club (4)



THE WINNER OF THE FEBRUARY CROSSWORD IS
THEO DEXTER FROM CHESTER, CHESHIRE

ACROSS 1. Jack Mann 7. Emir 8. Rich Lane 9. Tigers 10. Reilly 11. Isa 12. Savea 14. Knock 16. Ako 18. Gossip 20. Lemurs 22. Etzebeth 23. Alix 24. Plymouth.
DOWN 1. Jamaica 2. Carre 3. Morisi 4. Nocera 5. Final 6. Albion 13. Easter 15. Cornish 16. Appeal 17. Oldham 19. Outer 21. Ma'afu.

The crossword winner will receive £20. Closing date for entries is Monday 3 April and the result will appear in our June 2023 issue. One entry allowed per household. Send your entry, name & address and an email address to: Alan Pearey, China Cottage, Kenwood Mews, Outwood Lane, Horsforth, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS18 4HR. Alternatively, email your name & address plus a photo of the completed crossword to alan.pearey@futurenet.com. The competition is open to all ages. Compiled by Alan Pearey.

DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH

SIX NATIONS VERDICT

How was the championship won? We'll dissect the action to bring you telling insight, and continue our analysis of the women's tournament that will be in full flow

PLUS...

▼
Stephen Jones pulls no punches in his exclusive column
▼
Big-name interviews from the Six Nations
▼
The Analyst, Sean Holley

PIC Inpho

ON SALE TUESDAY 4 APRIL

FOCUS ON... CLUB RUGBY

Landmark season
Monmouth are relishing their 150th anniversary

PICS Gareth Roberts

Team of the Month **Monmouth**

FEW CLUBS have the longevity of Monmouth, whose 1873 formation pre-dates distinguished names like Cardiff, Newport and Bridgend. Indeed, it's a mystery why the club, situated close to the English border, wasn't a founding member of the WRU in 1881.

Successes have rolled along, from their 1902 'Invincibles' to their powerful interwar teams to the current group that won successive titles to reach Division One East. Past players include the late Eddie Butler, 1952 Grand Slam captain John Gwilliam and Hallam Amos.

Wins have proved elusive this season but a young side is making strides under the coaching of ex-Ebbw Vale pros Chay Billen and Jonathan Hawker. If the heavy Valleys pitches don't suit their expansive game, they have still impressed many. And while Poland prop Zen Szwagrzak, Monmouth's promotion-winning captain, has moved on, hooker Ed White has seamlessly taken the armband.

Skipper
Ed White v Penallta

"Ed puts his head in where it hurts and leads from the front," says president Byron Hapgood.

"We also have a 19-year-old fly-half called Harry Johnson, 6ft 2in and boots the ball a country mile. And in the back row we've got 21-year-old farmer's boy Jack Edwards and Will Korb, who along with lock Logan Woskett, 20, ensure the future of the pack is bright." The back division also brims with talent.

No one doubts Monmouth's fighting spirit, as evidenced by the late Ollie Park try that earned them a bonus point at Bedlinog. They sat tenth in the table as the Six Nations kicked off but without fear of relegation due to restructuring.

A recent dinner with Shane Williams as guest speaker was a rousing way to launch their 150th anniversary year. Other events include matches against Monmouthshire County and Crawshays Welsh XV, and a concert involving the town choir and London Welsh RFC choir on the eve of the Wales-England match.

Great stuff, Monmouth. Does your side merit recognition in these pages? Email details to alan.pearey@futurenet.com.

GET IN TOUCH

Email stories and pics to Clubs Editor Michael Austin at **aus231@aol.com** or call 01400 282189. Team of the Month entries to **alan.pearey@futurenet.com**

Carr driving ahead with ambitious Bulls

The ex-Wasps star tells Bobby Bridge about the painful events behind his return to South Africa

Childhood hero
"Schalk Burger – the first time I watched rugby was the 2003 World Cup. He was noticeable with his long blond hair, throwing his body all over. He could pass, he could tackle. I wanted to be like him"

Bulldozer
Carr scores v Stormers

FOUR MONTHS after losing his livelihood at a club he loved so dearly that he joined on three separate occasions, Nizaam Carr is finally ready to share his story.

Sat before his smartphone, perched inside his Pretoria home, joyful shrieks from the back-rower's young children Fatima and Naeem can be heard from a nearby room. They provided a timely reminder of what was at stake when he was among the players, coaches and staff to be instantly made redundant when Wasps, the six-time English champions, were liquidated last year.

With one crushing announcement, the former Springbok was left unemployed, thousands of miles from home and with a young family to provide for.

"I was in a dark space but I didn't want to admit it," the 31-year-old says. "Because that's how I've been raised. As the only breadwinner in the family, I've got to fight through it and hope things will get better. The closest people picked it up. Like my expressions maybe. It was an extremely tough time.

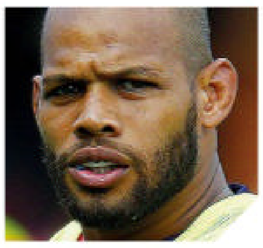
"Automatically, boom, you're left alone. You have no job. I leaned on my wife Aaesha and the family back home and the Wasps boys who suffered as I did."

While many team-mates and staff could boast more years of service or appearances, none of them could claim to have left their home country on three separate occasions to pull on Wasps' famous black-and-gold jersey.

Over a five-year spell between 2017 and 2022, Carr's CV reads: Stormers, Wasps (loan), Stormers, Wasps, Bulls, Wasps, Bulls. Circumstances changed but his desire to return to play for the fans who adored him burned brightly.

"I really loved the club," he adds on this. "I left South Africa so many times to come back. What happened, at times it was really unbearable."

A contributing factor to this struggle was the loss of his rugby inspiration a year previously. Nizaam's father Feizel took ill shortly before his son moved to England for a third time in 2021. Weeks after reviving the Wasps love affair, Carr senior passed away aged 57.



FACT FILE

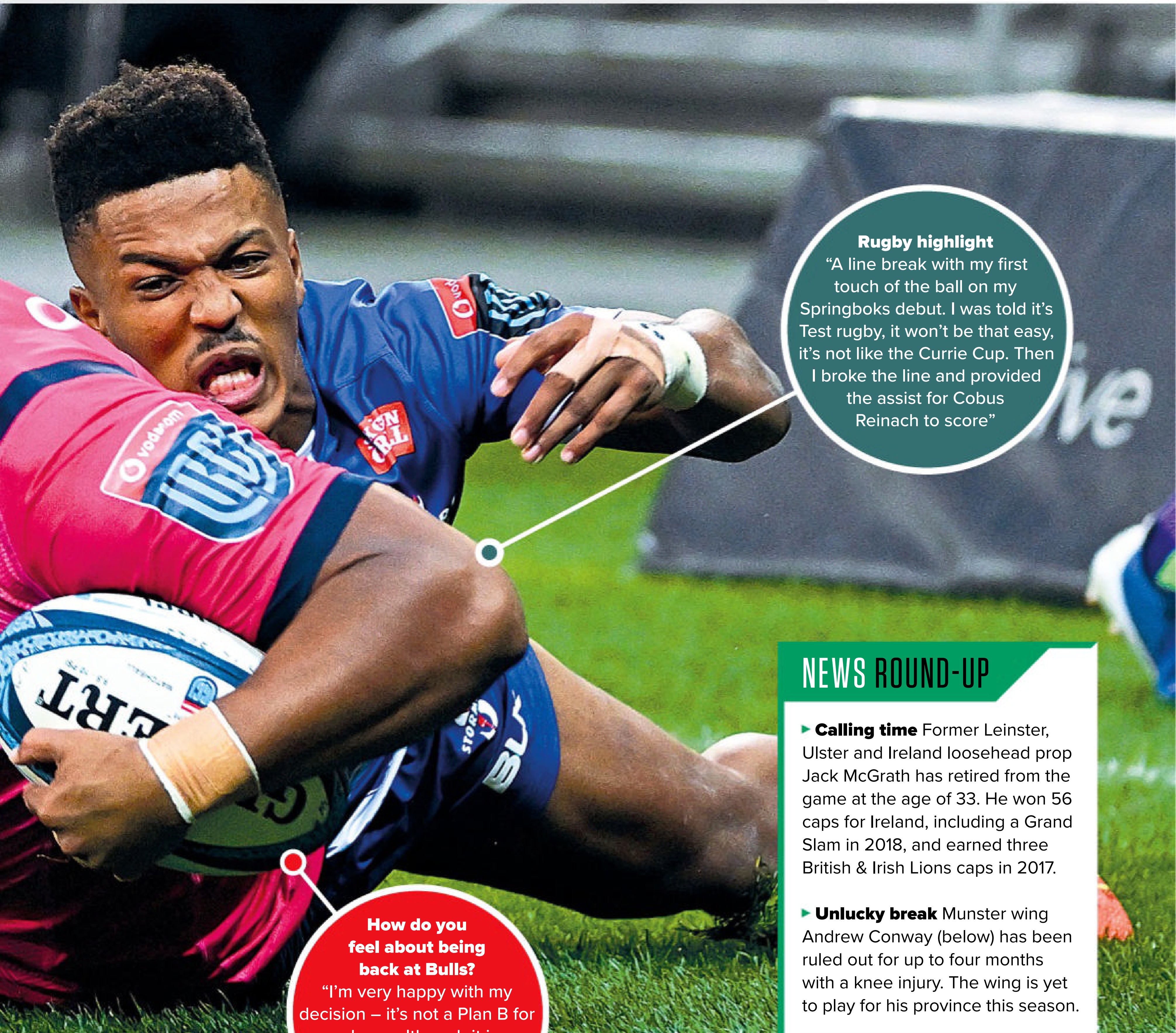
Name Nizaam Carr
Age 31 (4 April 1991)
Born Cape Town, South Africa
Team Vodacom Bulls
Position Back-row
Person you would like to meet Actor Denzel Washington, because he reminds me of my dad
Describe your personality I would say kind, friendly. At times I have a 'don't care' attitude but I do care. I know when to walk away
Favourite film *Braveheart*
Favourite book I don't read much but the latest book I read was *Can't Hurt Me* by David Goggins
Team-mate you would like to be I'd want to be Cornal Hendricks. He can sing and dance, he can do everything!

Shackled by Covid-related travel restrictions during a rugby season that was underway, Carr had to soldier on as he struggled to find the form that took the Gallagher Premiership by storm in his two previous spells.

"I wasn't at my dad's funeral," Carr tells *Rugby World*. "Although I said I was fine, deep down I was struggling. The man who took the best interest in my rugby, made me what I am today, taught me how to play and showed me everything I know, that person was not there any more and wasn't there when I was going through that tough time."

During the summer break between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons, he was able to return home and grieve with his mother and the rest of the family.

With the weight lifted, Carr started the current campaign in sparkling form. A lightning line break in Wasps' final game before their financial collapse provided



Rugby highlight
"A line break with my first touch of the ball on my Springboks debut. I was told it's Test rugby, it won't be that easy, it's not like the Currie Cup. Then I broke the line and provided the assist for Cobus Reinach to score"

How do you feel about being back at Bulls?
"I'm very happy with my decision – it's not a Plan B for me here, although it is a lifeline. I'm very satisfied and contented in my heart"

an assist for Jack Willis's try in a high-scoring defeat by Northampton.

Six months later and the pair will soon go head-to-head in a Heineken Champions Cup knockout game. On 2 April, Toulouse – who swooped to sign England ace Willis – host the Bulls at their Ernest Wallon Stadium.

"I'm not looking forward to playing Jack," Carr jokes. "I've already told the boys he is going to come at us! Whatever you do, whatever you try, it's not going to work, he's just going to beat you to every breakdown!"

The smile that has warmed so many rugby lovers' hearts returned at this juncture. There's an acceptance he was 'one of the lucky ones' to be offered a lifeline by Jake White and the Bulls.

Seven weeks after his final English Premiership appearance, Carr was a try-scorer just 12 minutes into his return to United Rugby Championship action, against the Ospreys last November.

That form extended to three scores in five games and Carr was soon rewarded with the first captaincy role of his senior career, taking the reins earlier this year.

"Mentally I've finally accepted what happened at Wasps," Carr says. "I think that shows in the way I'm playing. I'm enjoying my game. I'm enjoying the boys off the field and the family time. It's been truly amazing to be back." RW

NEWS ROUND-UP

- **Calling time** Former Leinster, Ulster and Ireland loosehead prop Jack McGrath has retired from the game at the age of 33. He won 56 caps for Ireland, including a Grand Slam in 2018, and earned three British & Irish Lions caps in 2017.

- **Unlucky break** Munster wing Andrew Conway (below) has been ruled out for up to four months with a knee injury. The wing is yet to play for his province this season.

- **Ground for sale** Western Province's push to sell their spiritual home, Newlands, got a boost after Western Cape Heritage committee decided not to declare the ground a heritage site. WP, the Stormers' union, were put under administration by SARU in 2021.

- **Award for Eben** Springbok lock Eben Etzebeth has been voted SA Rugby's 2022 Player of the Year, while Bulls wing Canan Moodie won Young Player of the Year.

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

Gloucester's Hunt still hungry for Mo

Enough about World Cup snubs, the England No 9 is as ambitious as ever. Sarah Rendell reports

Why rugby?
"I always knew I wanted to play sport for my country and when I started playing rugby it kind of took off really quickly. I never looked back"

NATASHA HUNT, the Gloucester-Hartpury and England scrum-half, says that as much as missing out on the World Cup hurt her, she is not focusing on her heartbreak. Rather, 'Mo' is working on her own game and letting "her rugby do the talking".

Hunt wasn't picked by soon-to-depart head coach Simon Middleton for the tournament in New Zealand. Instead, he chose Leanne Infante and Lucy Packer, with Claudia MacDonald also able to cover the nine shirt for the team that went on to lose to the hosts in the final.

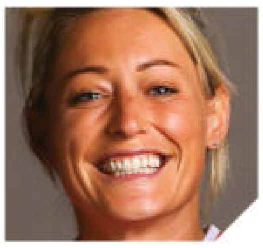
In reaction to being left out, Hunt has got stuck in with Gloucester and carried her good form into her club's best start to a Premier 15s season. When asked by *Rugby World* if she was on a 'revenge tour', the term used to describe England footballer Beth Mead's fine run at Euro 2022 after she was left out of the Olympics squad, she says: "It's just about rugby for me. I coach as well so I understand a decision has to be made.

"As much as that hurt me, it's all about getting my head down, getting stuck in, seeing what I can do the next few years and doing the best I can for the girls.

"I just want to play good rugby and let my rugby do the talking, wherever that may lead to. It's just about enjoying my rugby, that's something I have learned over the years. When I'm enjoying it I'm playing good rugby.

"I feel like I'm playing the best rugby I have played. I'm really enjoying my time at Gloucester and time with the girls. I would love to be a part of the home World Cup (in 2025). But at the end of the day that's not my decision."

What she can control are contributions for Gloucester-Hartpury, which include inflicting defending champions Saracens with their worst defeat in Premier 15s history. Hunt's team beat the London club 53-7 at StoneX Stadium.



FACT FILE

Name Natasha Hunt
Age 33 (21 Mar 1989)
Born Gloucester
Position Scrum-half
England caps 60
Nickname Mo (which comes from her younger sister not being able to pronounce her name)
Last book you read Ben Ryan's book on Fiji Sevens, *Sevens Heaven*
Favourite film *Erin Brockovich* (2000 drama)
Best takeaway Wagamama
Toughest opponent I would say New Zealand's Kelly Brazier is up there
Favourite stadium Twickenham, it would have to be
Childhood rugby hero I never had one growing up but I'd probably have to go for Jonny Wilkinson

The sparkling form of a team who finished sixth in the last campaign comes as no surprise to Hunt.

"If you look at our results over the last three years, we've been getting better and better," the Gloucester captain says. "We gel and not many people leave, which is a testament to the culture that we have here. We've brought in some individuals this year which has allowed us to have strength in depth, especially in the forwards. The strength in depth is brilliant. We have added people but we have built as a unit the whole way through and I think that is what has been so special.

"We have been very fortunate with the girls who have come in. Sarah Beckett, Sam Monaghan, Maud Muir to name a few. They are amazing carriers and get us on the front foot, which isn't something we've had over the last few seasons. We have gone really well."

The 33-year-old also attributes the club's success to Wales bringing in professional contracts for international players. Gloucester have 11 Welsh players who played for the country at the World Cup in their squad. Hunt says: "The girls in England have been

How would you describe your personality?
"Empathetic, outgoing and indecisive. It's so much easier when answering these questions about someone else!"

Did you play any other sports growing up?
"I played pretty much everything. Netball was my main one growing up but golf, tennis, football…"

professional for a while but the Wales girls got theirs, so they've had a lot more time to put into it. It's obviously changed the game for them, they've gone to the World Cup and come back in great nick and in great shape."

As well as great run of results, Hunt has experienced something else this season that she cherishes. Gloucester-Hartpury played host to Loughborough Lightning at Kingsholm in January. Gloucester-born Hunt says it was emotional for her to play a match at a ground that feels like her rugby home.

"It's amazing," she says of the experience. "I haven't played too many games there but it is so special every time. I grew up in the Forest of Dean and I've been here my whole life.

"To be running out there, I actually got to run out with my nephew (for the Loughborough match) as well. He was my mascot for the day. I asked and they let me take my little nephew out and he's only about 15 or 16 months old.

"It was just really special to be out there with my family watching as well. It does have a very special place in my heart and I was a little choked up chatting to the girls beforehand in my pre-match speech. It is definitely something I hold so dear and know how precious that is." RW

● *See Neve Jones Spotlight, P48-49*

NEWS ROUND-UP

▸ **League invite** Worcester and Sale have been offered conditional places in the Premier 15s next season after initially being omitted. Sale have started a crowdfunding campaign as part of their new 'Northern Rugby Matters' initiative.

▸ **Coach Brown** Retired England prop Shaunagh Brown (below) has been named coach of the Cayman Islands. "An incredible opportunity I couldn't turn down. The mission world domination has officially gone global," she tweeted.

▸ **Border force** In South Africa, Border Ladies will defend their Premier Division title against DHL WP, Golden Lions Women, EP Queens, Boland Dames, Blue Bulls Women and Sharks Women.

▸ **Stirling work** Stirling County, a recent RW Team of the Month, won the Scottish Premiership by beating Corstorphine Cougars 27-8.

PICS Getty Images & MI News/NurPhoto

"My parents fled Rwanda a month before the genocide"

William Iraguha tells Alan Dymock of his voyage to France sevens

SEVENS IS a game all about joy. And few deserve that more than the Iraguhas.

The France sevens star William cannot tell you where he spent some of his infancy – was it briefly into Rwanda or staying in Kenya, where he was born? – but he and his family have seen plenty of the world. The bad and the brilliant sides.

"I am Rwandese, as my mother and father were both born there," Iraguha begins. "My older brother was born in 1994 and that was like a month before the genocide. So my parents fled the country... Three years after that my mother was in Kenya, due to all the circumstances, and that's where I was born. Then I think my mother went back to Rwanda for a year, and my father and brother went to South Africa, Cape Town."

This is the grey area but what Iraguha knows for sure is that the family would spend years shifting in pairs, pooling resources and then reuniting. Thankful for avoiding horrors in their homeland amidst civil war, they have forged ahead, next through South Africa, where William would eventually learn rugby.

"But that whole time there, we had refugee status," he says. "It's not the easiest of lives to have refugee status in the country, it got a bit hectic. So my mother left for France in 2007. She sorted things out and planned for all of us to come over to France with her."

And here comes the cruellest twist. Burned into Iraguha's memory are the dates. The rest of the family were due to go to France on 24 November 2010. But on the 22nd, William's older brother was in a catastrophic car crash. He was left a tetraplegic after the accident. And so, with funds and circumstances prohibitive, William and his mother split off from father and brother once again, heading for France and the new life.

Some new heroes emerge here, with Iraguha passionately adding: "I think the Matt Hampson Foundation is truly

Chasing down ball
Iraguha v New Zealand

“I think the Matt Hampson Foundation is truly amazing”

amazing.” The group helped fund and make possible a family reunion, in France six months later. Again, it is a memorable day for Iraguha.

He explains: “They wanted it to be a surprise. My mother told me she was going on a small trip, so I went to the airport expecting to say goodbye. When I saw her at the airport she was in tears, and then I saw behind her that my father and brother were there. It was crazy. The family were in tears. It was nice.”

And here he is now, in the mixer with France, the home that embraced him and nurtured his rugby talents. In a side that may – whisper it – finally realise their potential on the Sevens World Series.

“We must aim for the top-three spot,” says Iraguha. It’s about time they click. With an Olympic Games in Paris coming up, the side want to be flying by then. “Look out for us,” Iraguha adds. And while it’s nice that this could be the most competitive sevens season ever, Iraguha has travelled enough to happen onto a path paved with gold.

DID YOU KNOW?

After five rounds of this season’s World Series, the men’s competition had seen five different winners: Australia, South Africa, Samoa, Argentina and New Zealand (above).

SEVENS GALLERY

Shots from the Sydney leg of the men’s and women’s competitions

Next-gen
Young fans

Thrillers in the mist
The Blitzboks

Tough takedown
NZ v Papua New Guinea

Flying the flag
A Samoa fan

Raise the game
Japan v France

Meeting the kids
Eddie Jones

SEVENS FACT

Kenya great Collins Injera (right) has announced his retirement after 17 years at the top. He scored 279 tries in the World Series, second only to Dan Norton, and played in five Sevens World Cups and one Olympic Games.

PICS Getty Images

GRASS ROOTS

Break-maker
Centre Damien Brambley v Worthing

PIC Warwick Baker

ROCHFORD HUNDRED

Three consecutive promotions and 54 wins in a row from April 2017 to October 2019 were a proud achievement for Essex-based Rochford. Predictably, the going has been tough in the subsequent National Two seasons but they've dug in for the long haul. Chairman Ray Stephenson said: "We train and play hard but our location makes it difficult to attract players. Our side is young but providing we can stay in National Two we will only get better. We've invested in an outside bar and BBQ area, all under cover, and a new 109-seater stand. There are 'mud-free' pathways around the pitch and superb floodlights."

Rochford run four senior men's sides, a women's XV and a full range of boys' and girls' sides, including the Little Rascals, U3s to U5s. Centre Sonny Gay and prop Aston Bevans-Royston are joint first-team captains with Danny Cleare as DoR and head coach. Bob Barba (forwards) and Mark Billings (backs) assist.

SPOKES IN THE WHEEL Unexpected setbacks interrupted **Keighley**'s ambition to win back-to-back titles. The day after head coach Dan McGee was rushed to hospital for an emergency hernia operation, his side suffered a surprise 32-20 loss to West Leeds.

The following week, Keighley were leading Beverley 19-17 when the Yorkshire One match was abandoned 11 minutes from full-time after referee Andy Baker pulled a hamstring.

Things still look bright for McGee's men. "We originally had a top-six finish in hand but we've competed against everyone so far," he said.

WYGGS WHAM Jack Elliott, the **Oadby Wyggestonian** fly-half and captain, completed 150 first-team appearances in the 39-31 win at Sutton Coldfield.

And the Fleetwood family, also of Wyggs, had a day to savour. Full-back Andy turned out alongside sons Jack, 20, and Ben, 18, in a third-team match at Belgrave. They almost combined to score a length-of-the-field try towards the end of the match!

ABOVE THE WATER LINE **Bridgnorth**, of R1 Midlands, made a wise move when applying for planning permission to build a 'flood-proof' clubhouse raised 2.5m above the ground. Work began last August and the final concrete has been poured to complete the foundations. The River Severn burst its banks yet again but everything was secure.

C2 Cornwall club **St Ives** have plans afoot to relocate their clubhouse and second-team pitch. The existing land will provide care homes and affordable housing for local people.

Beverley, riding high in Counties 1 Yorkshire, launched a fundraising campaign towards redeveloping Beaver Park. New floodlights and the resurfacing of the car park will cost £70,000.

VISIBLE DIFFERENCE **Ilkley**'s players are seeing their name in lights, following the installation of a state-of-the-art LED scoreboard with a digital screen at Stacks Field. Funded by local donations, it features an easy-to-read layout, improved visibility even in bright sunlight and high-resolution graphics. The colour display features player images, clips of previous games and upcoming fixtures. It had a winning start, too, on the afternoon when Ilkley beat Scunthorpe 14-7 in R1 North-East.

SHORT PASS

Exeter University flanker Ross Vintcent started for Italy A in their 64-3 win against Romania A at Viadana. South African-born and a former Italy U20 captain, he was previously with Zebre Parma and made his debut for Exeter Chiefs last September in a Premiership Cup win against Bristol.

LAND SALE Members of National Two West title chasers **Clifton** are supporting the sale of around four acres of the club's land. The proceeds will finance the redevelopment of their ground and a new clubhouse at Cribbs Causeway.

R2 North club **Morpeth** have augmented their clubhouse renovation with a new public address system. The Northumberland Freeemasons made it possible by presenting a cheque for £3,000 to the club. Secretary Ken Fraser said: "We're really grateful. The increase in clubhouse bookings also reflects what our enhanced facilities offer."

END OF AN ERA Ollie Akroyd, the most successful coach in **Old Brodleians**' 92-year history, has stepped down as head coach at the Halifax-based R2 North-East club. Under his guidance, Brods won the Yorkshire One title, were North Division Champions in the National Cup and were one match away from the final at Twickenham when Covid struck.

Akroyd joined them at the age of eight and had a successful senior playing career. Lee Imiolek and Neil Sheard have now taken over his role.

WORTHY MILESTONES Salute the double centurions! **Hull Ionians** prop Dave Laverick, a Yorkshire and England Counties player, has joined the '250 Club', having missed only 15 matches since his debut in September 2012.

Blackheath pair Markus Burcham, a centre, and back-five forward Tom Stradwick received club caps after reaching 200 games. Burcham had played in 234 matches at the last count, the first being in 2012, while Stradwick's total is 201, dating back to 2011.

Rams centre Stevie Bryant also completed 200 games when his side achieved a 33-27 win at Cambridge in National One. He has also played for Cheltenham North, Old Patesians, Henley, Bracknell and Gloucestershire.

MOVING ON There are changes at National Two East **North Walsham**, with coaches James Knight and Ryan Oakes moving on this summer. Oakes is settling in Australia while Knight's growing commitments at Gresham's School, Holt means he is unable to continue as DoR.

They've overseen successful spells for Walsham, whose successive promotions restored them to the National Leagues this season after a 15-year absence.

WELSH TITAN Gary Pearce, a former Wales fly-half, has become the head of coaching at National Two North club **Rotherham Titans**. He is no stranger to Yorkshire, having lived there for 37 years since signing for league club Hull FC. In union, he guided Hull to promotion to National One last season, emulating his similar achievement with Hull Ionians.

Martin Jenkinson, director of rugby at the Titans, a former Premiership club, said: “It’s a first appointment because we need a team of coaches to get us back where we want to be.”

PROP SIGNING Former Wasps prop Elliot Millar-Mills has joined **Chinnor**, of National One, having previously trained with the club before going to Bath as short-term injury cover. He’s also been with Edinburgh, Ealing and Leeds Tykes and made 21 appearances for Wasps before the club’s suspension last October.

His sisters, Bridget and Harriet, have been capped by Scotland and England respectively.

LEGENDARY GUESTS **Lutterworth**, of R2 East Midlands, are celebrating their 150th anniversary this season and are welcoming former Leicester, England and Lions pair Martin Johnson and Dean Richards as guest speakers to a special dinner on 28 April. The event will be hosted in a marquee seating 250 people at their Bitteswell ground.

SHORT PASS

The London Welsh Rugby Club Choir has been chosen to perform both the Italian and Welsh anthems at Stadio Olimpico as the teams line up before the Six Nations match on 11 March. The choir’s ethos is to support the R1 South Central club through friendship and song.

MATT STEPS UP **Bournemouth** appointed Matt Sturgess as their DoR in late season. He has been with the R1 South Central club for almost 20 years as a player in the early days and then a mini-junior and colts’ coach. His transition into the senior section was in 2018 as the head forwards coach.

Chairman Simon Carkeet said: “His passion and dedication for the club made him an obvious choice.”

CAPTAINS’ CONFLAB Six former **Newark** captains had plenty of past times to mull over at one of the club’s pre-match lunches before the 15-13 defeat by Belgrave in R2 North Midlands.

In ascending seniority they were Nick Maltby (from 1966-69), Alan Swain, Tim Barker, Nick Scott, Jon Lees and, the most recent, Steve Mathias (1995-97).

It was ‘Farmers’ Day’, an annual event at **Launceston**, who narrowly failed to bring home the bacon in a 18-17 loss to Brixham in R1 South-West. Those who work the land and many others relished the afternoon – and evening – at Polson Bridge. Redruth held a similar event when beating Luctonians 21-3 a week earlier.

Full stretch
Fly-half Jack Kyle fends off Newark

PIC Michael Austin

BELGRAVE

Debt-free and rich in history, Leicester-based Belgrave are hovering around the relegation zone in Regional 2 North Midlands but are enjoying meeting new opponents after restructuring. Secretary Mark Crumbie said: “It’s been challenging at times, with the style of rugby a little more combative, but the lads have persevered. We won our first two games in the new year and our long-term aim is to remain at Level Six.” Crumbie returned to the game as a player aged 43, having not taken the field since he was 16. He added: “We have the reputation of being the most social club in Leicester.”

Belgrave, celebrating their 140th anniversary this year, run two men’s teams. They’re captained by No 8 Elliott Walker, backed by coaches David Towl, Mark Deaville, Kevin Curtis and Tom Ball. With an eye on the future, they’re looking to revive their mini-junior section next season.

DATES FOR THE DIARY Another yearly favourite, the **Ellingham & Ringwood** Good Friday Festival of Touch Rugby and Real Ale, will take place on 7 April. There will be 24 teams competing.

Looking further ahead, budding U18 goalkickers have the opportunity to take part in the **Alred Trophy**, the biggest junior goalkicking competition in the world, at Sixways, Worcester on 16 July. It’s split into three categories – Boys U18, Girls U18 and Mixed U14.

BY GEORGE! George Hayes not only started at No 8 in his 100th game for **Tring** but was Man of the Match in the 25-15 defeat by Sidcup in R1 South-East.

Will Macaulay is **Maidenhead**’s latest centurion in terms of appearances and received a commemorative cap after the 35-17 defeat by Camberley in R1 South Central. The flanker said: “It’s good to see the youth development here and the club is progressing very well.”

Wing Michael Dykes, a former Maids junior player, proved the point with a hat-trick on his Premiership debut for London Irish against Harlequins.

TRUANTS ADVENTURE No sooner had **Rosslyn Park** beaten Darlington Mowden Park 31-21 at Roehampton in National One than the ‘Truants’ turned their thoughts to an impending trip to Buenos Aires, across the River Plate and into the Uruguyan bush. Club chairman Adam Tyrer set off with 35 like-minded travellers for no ordinary bike ride.

Every two years or so, they go to a distant land and on their previous eight trips they raised £5m for children’s charities Nordoff Robbins, Teenage Cancer Trust and Childline. They hire mountain bikes locally and cycle 100km in a day and join the ranks of inadvertent unsung heroes.

CHARITY WALK **Redruth**, of National Two West, undertook a three-day, 45-mile walk for the Brain Tumour Trust in memory of back-row Neil Douch, who died last May after a long illness.

Much loved and admired, he was club captain in the 125th anniversary season and played his final game in 2011. The route took in his first club Wadebridge Camels, Padstow, Mawgan Porth, Newquay, St Agnes and inland to Redruth RFC in time for the participants to attend a players’ reunion. RW

HOW IRELAND EXECUTED THE PERFECT SET PLAY

Sean Holley analyses the Hugo Keenan try that helped end France's run

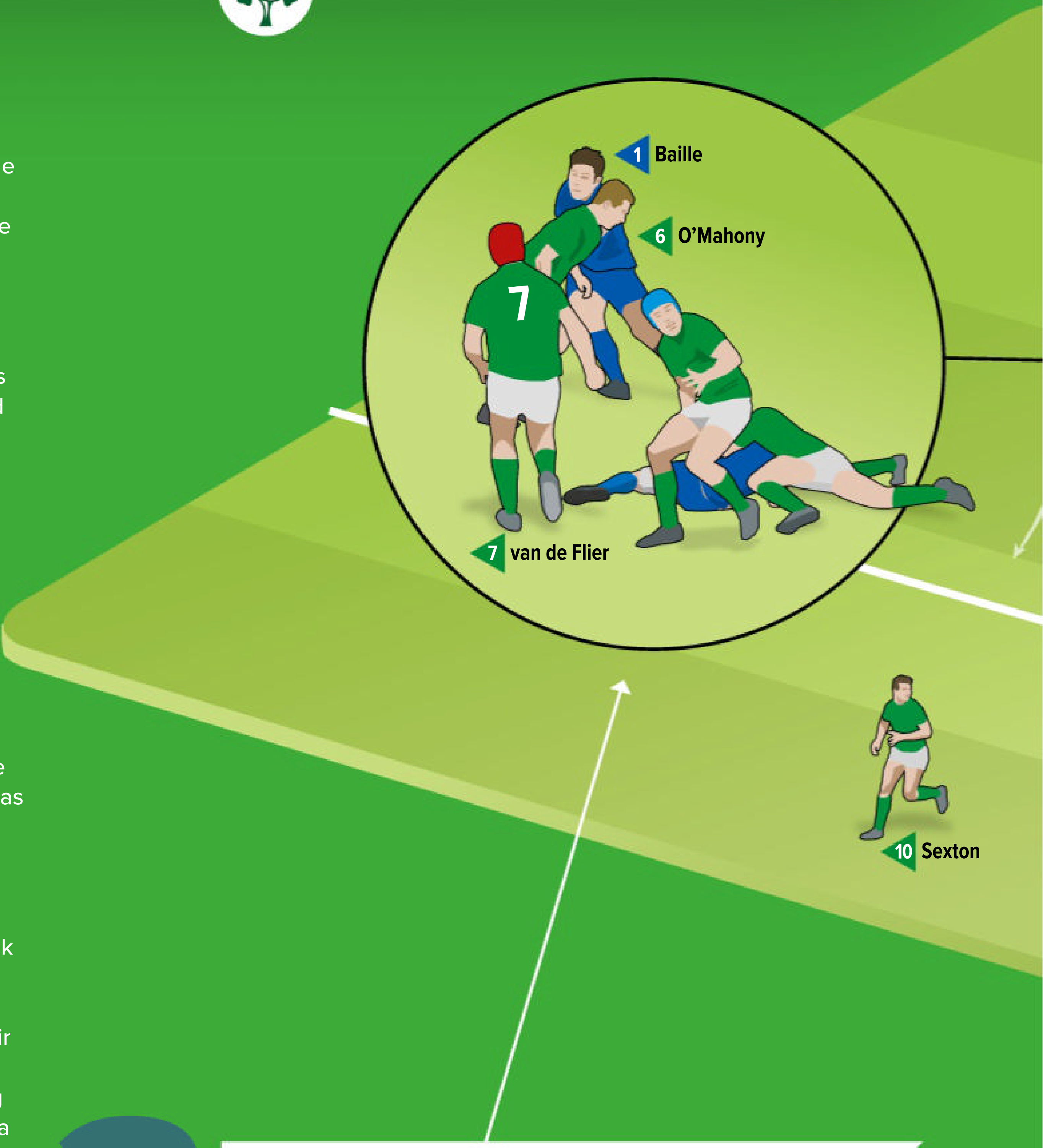
ROUND TWO of the Six Nations saw a classic between the world's top two teams, Ireland and France. In ending France's run of 14 wins, Andy Farrell's side stayed on track for an Irish Grand Slam and cemented their credentials as a full-on World Cup contender.

Ireland's half of the World Cup draw contains France, South Africa, New Zealand and Scotland but their form suggests that they fear no one. And nor should they.

They are capable of scoring different kinds of tries and the stats back up the commentators' superlatives. The ball-in-play time for Ireland v France was 46 minutes – the equivalent figure for England v Italy was 37 minutes. Ireland made seven line breaks and carried for over 1,000m. France had to make 235 tackles in Dublin and, just like Leinster in the domestic competitions, Ireland's attack is purring. Their conversion rate from entries into the 22 is setting the bar.

One of the stand-out features of their play is their ruck speed, with 65% of their possession against France being between 0-3 seconds. And for me as a former coach it's impressive to see how many Irish players are visibly improving as the weeks go by. Their smartness and skill level, their confidence and camaraderie, is a pleasure to watch.

One of their tries against France really summed up the cohesion and skill of the team and how they're able to execute a pre-planned play in a game of the biggest magnitude. Hugo Keenan – a revelation at full-back – rounded off a magical try following a French kick downfield, and that is what I've looked at in more detail this month...



3

THE PLAY. With Murray running around him, Bealham subtly shows to pass back to the scrum-half but instead dummies, turning his body in the process. His movements and that of Murray attracts the defence on this side of the ruck. Willemse has closed in on Bealham, leaving the space for Keenan to run into. Anthony Jelonch and Gaël Fickou on the outside are transfixed by the movement of Murray, Herring and Ringrose. O'Mahony and van der Flier prevent prop Cyril Baille, the defender closest to the ruck on the far side, from reacting and moving across to the direction of the attack (inset).

Coaching Points The timing of the runs by Herring and Ringrose makes the play look realistic and as if the direction of play will be towards them. Murray's initial pass will encourage the French forwards to move off their line and towards him and Murray's run will promote this. The key now for Ringrose and Herring is to take the timing of their runs off Murray so that it looks like he will get the ball again.

1

THE BUILD-UP. From a goal-line drop-out by France, the ball reaches Caelan Doris on halfway and the No 8 carries hard down the middle so that Ireland can split their attack. Doris is tackled and our illustration picks up what happens from the ensuing ruck.

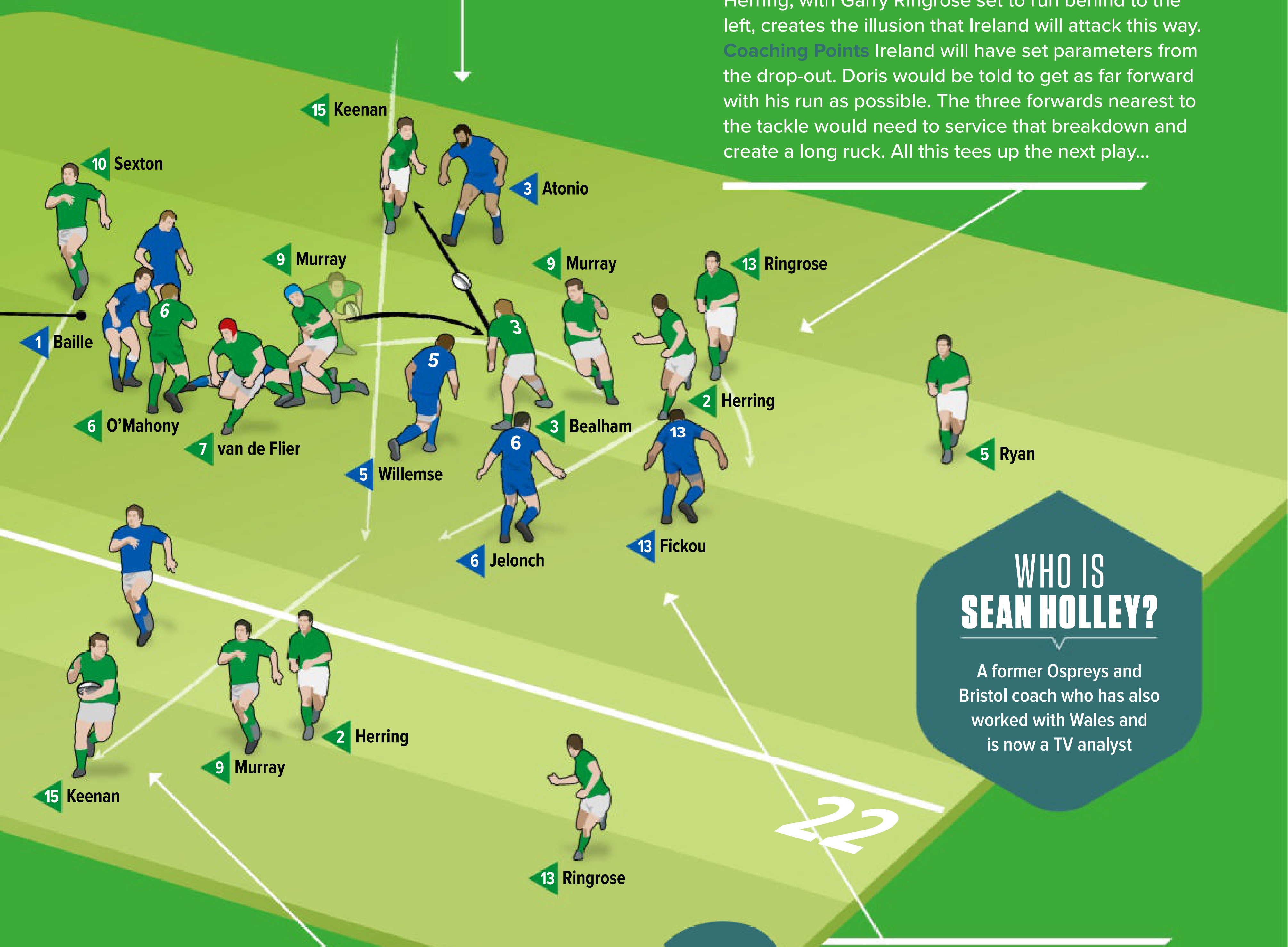
Finlay Bealham is left of the ruck, Johnny Sexton to the right. Peter O'Mahony has nullified the threat of Julien Marchand at the tackle area and he and Josh van de Flier make the ruck long to extend the distance the defenders must cover to fold to Bealham's side of the attack. Outside Bealham, the positioning of Rob Herring, with Garry Ringrose set to run behind to the left, creates the illusion that Ireland will attack this way. **Coaching Points** Ireland will have set parameters from the drop-out. Doris would be told to get as far forward with his run as possible. The three forwards nearest to the tackle would need to service that breakdown and create a long ruck. All this tees up the next play...

2

THE SET-UP. Sexton setting up to the right attracts most of the defence to that side. Bealham's body angle and closeness to Conor Murray is vital. The scrum-half makes the short pass to Bealham, who is static at this point. Murray runs around the prop as if to take another pass from Bealham to continue the attack towards the left side, ably supported by the potential threat of Herring and Ringrose. **Coaching Points** By keeping his outside foot up, Bealham engages Paul Willemse. O'Mahony and van der Flier must be careful not to obstruct any defender as they lengthen the ruck. Murray must move quickly and look as if he's going to receive a pass back from Bealham – he does this by calling for the ball and having his hands up ready to catch.

4

THE STING. Ireland now execute. Willemse has been drawn out of position and the outside defence have their feet planted. Keenan has started his run from the other side of the ruck, outside the eyeline of Willemse and other defenders on that side of the ruck. Bealham passes back inside to Keenan, who sprints on an angle between Willemse's inside shoulder and the ruck. Baille is powerless to make up the ground. **Coaching Points** Keenan's timing is all on Bealham. Once Murray has run past the prop, that's the perfect time for Keenan to coincide his run with Bealham's pass. With Keenan at full pelt, Bealham's pass needs to be sympathetic and suspended in the air – easy to catch.



WHO IS SEAN HOLLEY?

A former Ospreys and Bristol coach who has also worked with Wales and is now a TV analyst

5

THE FINISH. Keenan flies through the gap and straightens his running line, knowing that support – Sexton from the far side and Murray, Herring and Ringrose to the left – is pouring through. With so many options for Keenan, Romain Ntamack (not shown) has to back off and Keenan surges to the line. **Coaching Points** Herring, Ringrose and Sexton have set things up perfectly with their positioning and body language. They know Keenan will get the ball so hold their runs and take their timing from him. This is difficult as they're moving slowly whereas Keenan will be flying. The execution is so good that Keenan doesn't even need the support. What a try!

ILLUSTRATION Artlife

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING THIS MONTH...

HEAVE LIKE THE BEST FORWARD PACKS

1 MOVE

BEFORE THE Six Nations began, England tighthead Kyle Sinckler explained that scrummaging is "so fine in terms of the technique. It's literally millimetres sometimes; the placement of your right foot, your binding with the hooker, where you're binding..." And in 2023 it's the same for mauling: every detail at the top end is agonised over.

Which can be sapping enough before you get into the actual arm-wrestle. So how do you condition for the set-piece?

"We do a lot of technical work in the gym, often as basic as jumping technique to be as explosive as possible," begins Newcastle assistant Scott MacLeod.

"I particularly like working on foot patterns and speed of movement over the ground into the jump and I suppose the goal of all this is to imbed muscle memory, so that it can be done without thinking. We do a lot of overhead lifting and again focus on explosion and power.

"We do a lot of simulation training"

"In training a lot is based around our analysis, to give clarity on potential opportunities, and we do a lot of simulation training to practise under pressure. We reflect a lot on training sessions and review video to highlight what's working and, more importantly, to learn from our mistakes.

"We do goal-setting as a group and a lot of visualisation in the lead-up to games and I would also encourage players to watch their highlights, so they are buzzing when it comes to kick-off."

There's no avoiding the impact of the maul. After England beat Italy, head coach Steve Borthwick remarked, "The team needs to build the right tactical plan within a game. Today was the maul. That doesn't mean it will be next week or the week after, but we've got to build some strengths within this team."

GILBERT
GILBERT
GILBERT
umbro
O2

Maul or nothing Ollie Chessum at England training

Q How does all the gym and conditioning work marry up with the on-pitch preparation for the set-piece?

A Scrummaging and mauling place considerable demands on the quadriceps to produce sustained high forces and power outputs during short bouts, *writes Leicester's physical performance coach Luke Woodhouse.* So try barbell squatting with a shoulder-width stance or a leg press – doing 3-5 sets of 3-5 reps will help develop quad force.

Sustained power output can be developed with 4-8 repeated bouts of cycling for 30 seconds at 80% max effort, with three minutes' recovery. Higher set and rep ranges are suitable during pre-season, with lower ranges for heavy competition periods.

WORDS Alan Dymock. **RECIPE** Woman's Weekly

2 FEED

PRAWNS PIL-PIL

SERVES 2

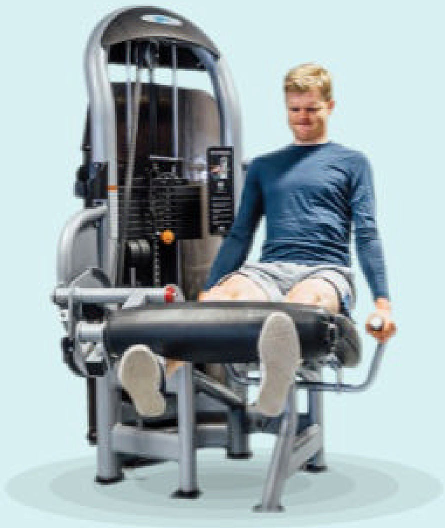
1 Heat the oven to 200°C. Heat 3½ tablespoons of oil in a shallow frying pan over a low heat. Gently cook the garlic, shallots, paprika and chilli flakes for 10-12 minutes, until softened.
2 Meanwhile, boil the new potatoes for 10-12 minutes, until tender. Set aside.
3 Toss the red pepper in the remaining oil. Put into a roasting tin and roast for 10 minutes, until slightly charred. Add the kale and toss well. Return the roasting tin to the oven for a further two minutes. Combine with the potatoes.
4 Add the sherry and prawns to the garlic mix and cook for two minutes each side, until just pink and cooked through.
5 Scatter parsley over the pil-pil and add the zest of half a lemon. Cut wedges from the other half to accompany it. Serve with the vegetables and aioli or mayo.

- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 2 shallots, peeled and thinly sliced
- ½ teaspoon sweet smoked paprika
- Pinch of dried chilli flakes, optional
- 100g miniature new potatoes
- 1 red pepper, deseeded & chopped
- 60g kale
- 2 tablespoons dry sherry
- 200g raw tiger prawns
- Large handful of chopped parsley
- 1 lemon
- Aioli or garlic mayonnaise, additional condiment to serve

3 TRAIN

STEPS TO SUCCESS

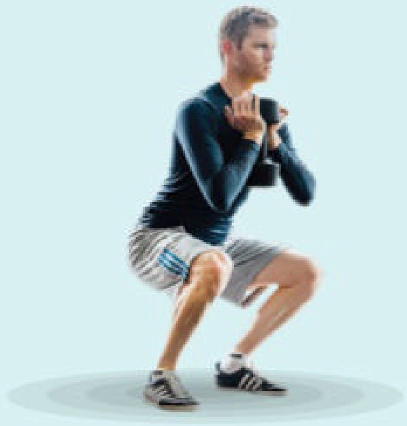
Your legs will burn. You can cycle but why not try these exercises, and one Luke Woodhouse suggests too…



1 Leg extension

// 3 x 6 REPS

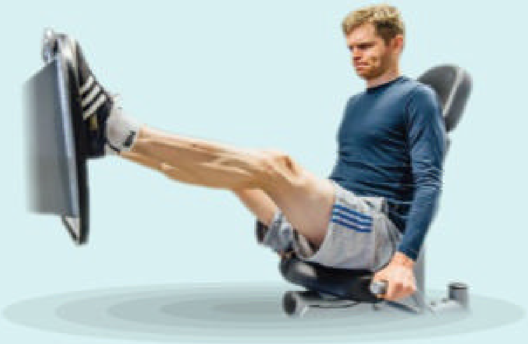
Use purely as warm-up. With a lighter weight, extend legs up to straight in a controlled manner.



2 Pause goblet squat

// 3 x 4 REPS

Holding a dumbbell or kettlebell at chest height, perform a full squat, pausing at the bottom for two seconds.



3 Leg press

// 3 x 3-5 REPS

On a leg press machine, keep back flat against pad and extend legs out – but don't fully lock knees at the top. Control back.

HOW TO SCAN AT THE RUCK

Crusaders and former England scrum-half **Willi Heinz** offers some tips

"If the ball is quick, you can go a few steps and challenge those defenders around the edge. But that's not an option if the ball is slow. Remember to change your mind if the picture changes. If you thought it was on to attack the edge but now the ball is slow, change your mind – don't just back your original idea."

"The first thing is awareness of where the ball is. Is the carrier looking to offload? If so, make sure you're there ready for the second touch. If there's going to be a breakdown, see if there are guards in place. If they've been slow to get in position, you can have a run. If you're near the sidelines, look at the number of defenders they have against your attackers. If you have more attackers, you can hit the short side."

"Put yourselves under pressure in training. You also want to be clear and confident about what the game plan is, to make it easier in games. Mistakes happen and you don't want to stew on them. Players will often have a cue after making a mistake: maybe a few deep breaths, or looking to a particular point in the crowd, or something as simple as touching a shoulder. Find something that works for you to prevent you from being overwhelmed if you make a mistake."

"Communication is massive. We usually split players up and they are responsible for communicating where the space is. That way you don't have 14 voices all coming at you at once. However, as a scrum-half you would usually go with the loudest voice."

INTERVIEW Sam Larner. **PICS** Getty Images

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★STAR LETTER★

New stars need stability

After two rounds of the Six Nations, a portion of supporters were crying with outrage because Warren Gatland had picked a load of old codgers again. But should he really be chucking in all of the country's youngsters at once?

I get that it's frustrating seeing Alun Wyn Jones hobbling around but if you fill a team with no experience at all, then who can the young players learn from? Performances have been bad, but not whole new XV bad.

England haven't performed so well themselves in recent memory, but they are bringing in new talent with the guard rails of experienced players around them. Like it or not, Owen Farrell is the safest pair of hands out there and he can shepherd new players through games. What is important is that new stars have the physical attributes to play really well and so can learn from others around them. Look at young Henry Arundell.

There is a lot of expectations on his young shoulders already, but if he is managed well, surely he can learn good habits from England's best?

Ross Carmichael, Newcastle

RW says: It's a big call so early in Arundell's career to single him out but he is exciting. What do others reckon?

Crunch corner
Arundell scores

No more Delilah

It was reported that they would ban the singing at the Principality Stadium of the 1960s Tom Jones hit song *Delilah*. While rugby authorities may have concerns over the lyrics, this song has a strong tune, well-suited to being belted out by thousands at a match. As someone said a long time ago: "Why should the Devil have all the best tunes?"

We've become accustomed to "reuse and recycle" when it comes to physical objects which we no longer want, so why not reuse and recycle this tune?

Jay Flynn, Maidenhead, Berkshire

On the road to league

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is in need of a rewrite! The term 'hooker' used to have two meanings; now alas the one appertaining to the person in the middle of the front row of a scrum needs to be withdrawn. There is also need for a rewrite of the laws of rugby union with reference to a 'straight put-in'.

Having watched the Six Nations, it is clear to all but a blind person that the need to 'hook the ball' has gone, with the scrum-half now standing at 45° to the scrum and the ball being fed between the wing forward's right leg and the second-row's left leg!

How long will it be before the scrummage disappears from the game altogether and it takes a step closer to rugby league?

Richard Hoyland
Claverdon RFC, Warwickshire

Cuddle club
France and the Black Ferns

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

Squint feeds

Two things struck me while watching the opening weekend of the Six Nations. As I recall, scrum-halves had to put the ball in straight at a scrum and hookers had to have both feet behind the line when throwing in. From what I could see, the ball was being fed straight into the second row at scrum time and only the hooker's heels were touching the line. Are refs not that bothered about them anymore?

Phil Eacott, Woodford Green, East London

Hug it out

Re strangest thing seen on a pitch:
My son was playing in a particularly bad-tempered game at a suburban London comp a few years back. There was a lot of pushing and shoving and general angriness on both sides. The opposition's biggest player was particularly cross, going off and yelling.

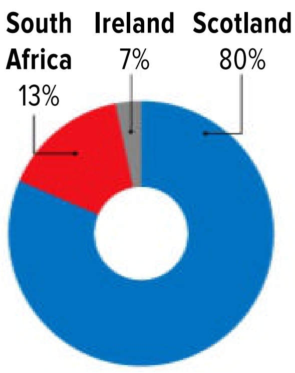
My lad, not small himself, says to the big fella, loud enough for the forwards on both teams to hear, "Does someone need a hug?" Everyone laughs, including people on the sideline. The big bloke smiles and says "yes".

They have a big cuddle. Everyone is almost crying with laughter by this point and the game restarts and continues in good spirits.

Scott the Lought, Facebook

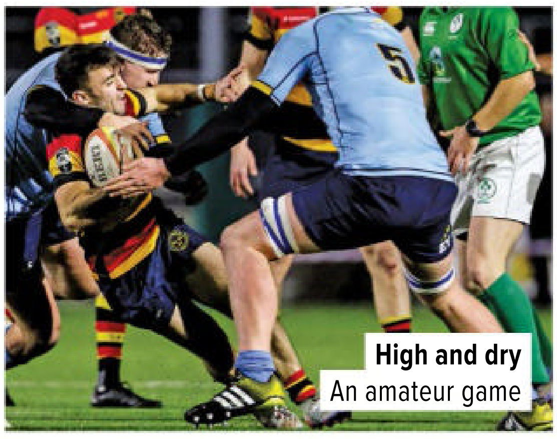
THE RW POLL

Which team is most likely to crash out of World Cup Pool B?



Say I do...

In 1987 on tour in California, after a Fresno game, one of their players got married on



High and dry
An amateur game

the pitch in their kit. And one of our guys was the best man. Bizarre but wonderful at the same time!

David Powell, Llanidloes, Powys

Baby steps

I once saw a big clearance kick land straight in a pram near the side of the pitch. Fortunately the baby wasn't in it, but in the mother's arms…

David Botterill, Ilkley, West Yorkshire

Knee-jerk tackle laws

I fail to understand the logic behind the policy to reduce the tackle height. While I support anything that will reduce the risk of injuries, for this change to exclude the top level of the game seems to be like deciding to start to drive on the right side of the road but making it a gradual change with cars and vans changing in the first week, while lorries and buses change over on week two.

It's a policy that is doomed to failure. We have a difficult balancing act to not destroy the game.

Rob Minto, Cambridgeshire

And the tackled player?

Whenever there is discussion about the dangers in the aftermath of a "tackle" (as defined in Law 14), all the emphasis is around Law 14.5 – what the tackler must do. Yet there is too little discussion around the obligation on the tackled player. Law 14.7 is clear on obligations to "immediately" make the ball available by releasing, passing or pushing the ball away behind the tackle area.

Note: "release" should not include still holding on to the ball, or keeping his/her hand on it (which happens all the time). It makes it more difficult for the tackler who has got up and moved away from the tackled player (14.5.b) to pick it up, or any other player arriving.

I suggest that were this more strictly enforced, there would be fewer players, head below hips over tackled players, trying to pick up the ball. It's an area of extreme danger. It would have the added benefit of speeding up the game.

Adam Chippindall, St Mawgan, Cornwall

Bogged down

Re worst pitches you've ever seen: Our game for Sale against Wasps 2s ladies in the early/mid-90s was on an absolute quagmire. You couldn't actually run… It was pretty funny, mind. And those enormous heavy cotton shirts didn't help either. Happy days!

Sonia Harris, Manchester

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Peekaboo!
Sale boss Alex Sanderson

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THE SECRET PLAYER

Our former pro provides a unique insight into the game

"Someone running away with your jersey is hard to take"

▶ **IT'S REALLY** naive to suggest that there aren't rivalries within teams.

At every single club, national team, British & Irish Lions, there are rivalries the whole way up. You are competing for your spot and that spot means more game time, it means a pay increase and access to a different wage structure and bonuses. That rivalry exists because if you're driven and you want to do well in professional rugby, you have to outwork and outperform whoever else is fighting for that same jersey.

That doesn't mean bad blood, or at least it shouldn't. I've roomed with guys that I competed with for a national jersey who were really good guys and that made for some healthy competition. In 16 or 17 years of rugby I can only think of one shocker of a bloke who was in my position, a terrible man who pretended to be everyone's friend but manipulated and bullied the younger players to get ahead.

The good thing about healthy rivalry is that it should push everyone's standards up. Have that in every unit and the whole team should raise their game. Of course, even then you have to think that you are the best player for the job – otherwise what are you doing there? But that's where things are out of your hands because the big boss makes the final decision.

You want your mates and rivals to be doing well, but not to the detriment of your success. If you have a second-row unit of four people or back-row group of six or seven people at club or country level, you want a decent level of rotation so that you're all playing and performing and getting the best out of each other. If there is one exceptional person who is head and shoulders above everyone else and they are running away with the jersey that you want, that can be particularly hard to take.

I remember not being picked for a national squad for a big tour, and it was really tight with some players. And then the local media highlighted me as a player to keep an eye on – and I wasn't even in the squad. My phone blew up with mates sending me screenshots and WhatsApps about it, while everyone else was out there trying to focus on performing and enjoying the trip abroad.

Hooker rivals
Dan Sheehan and Ronan Kelleher

My ability to advance my game or take part in a big tournament was gone because a rival had taken my spot after he performed better in the warm-up games. I didn't begrudge him that at all, but that was really difficult to deal with.

That's just the way the cookie crumbles in elite rugby. You hit the skids and then a year or 18 months later, you're flavour of the month again. Because coaches change their mind like the wind and you can end up getting back in and playing a blinder next Test. And you're back in a hotel room making a cup of tea for another national rival.

The next few months are about trying to get to a World Cup. Then to win a World Cup is the pinnacle, apart from maybe going on a Lions tour, if you're from this part of the world.

So everybody's aim is the same. Try to finish the club season with some sort of silverware, sure. Get a contract or negotiate for next season if you're off-contract, maybe. Do not get injured whatever you do.

But everyone wants to put themselves into what is the most gruelling, intense and competitive three-month off-season block of your life, doing horrid World Cup prep with the national team.

Every single day, data will be displayed around every room at the team base, so that people can see statistically how they're faring against their rivals. And then at the end of those three months, there's going to be people who aren't going be taken on the plane to France to join what will probably be the best World Cup we've ever seen.

It'll be a massive disappointment or elation for others, validation for some. However you want to see it, this is the most competitive environment you get in elite professional sport. And we accept it because we're the most competitive people. RW

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